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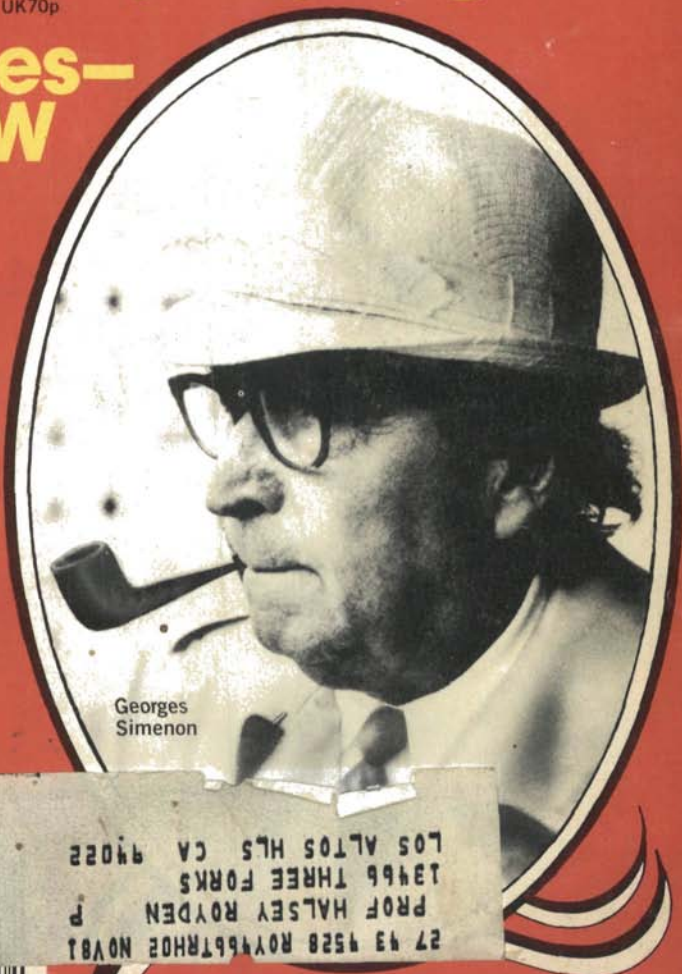
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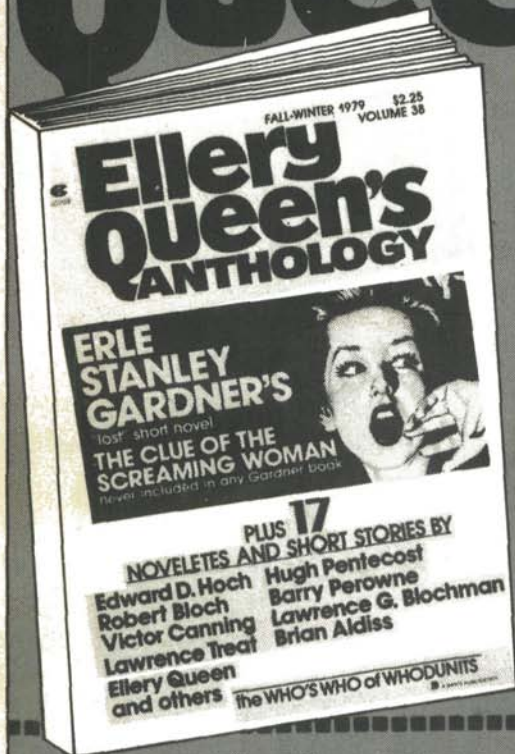
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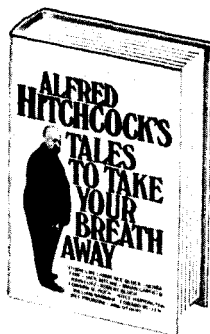
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THE LEDBETTER SYNDROME

by **STANLEY ELLIN**

As Chief Clerk of the county's Hall of Records, Mr. Ince reigned with benevolent inefficiency over a pleasant domain which Women's Liberation had either passed by or not yet arrived at. The domain, on the top floor of the county courthouse, was a spacious room cluttered with filing cabinets and metal book-racks and with a well-worn counter where the public was served. On the counter at appropriate intervals, hand-lettered signs indicated where the public was to present its queries about *Births & Deaths* or *Marriages* or *Property Records* (*Deeds & Abstracts*).

A staff of three serving under Mr. Ince provided the advertised services. Miss McCurdy and Miss Schultz, both Clerk, Grade 2, were oldtimers on the job. Mrs. Rogers, Clerk, Grade 5, was a relative latecomer. A widow, she had been a native Chicagoan, assistant to her struggling shopkeeper husband there for the twenty years of their marriage. After his unexpected death by heart failure, she had emigrated westward to the placid county seat of Kandia Falls to share life with her already widowed sister and eventually, when what little money there was had run out, had taken the necessary civil service examination and wound up as a member of Mr. Ince's team.

1979 by Stanley Ellin.

So there they were, the four of them tucked away under the occasionally leaky roof of the courthouse, getting along with each other very well indeed. Cheerful dispositions were what their leader wanted around him on the job, and the ladies generally obliged. This imposed little strain on them since they all admired him intensely, a robust, high-spirited man and certainly the least demanding and most tolerant of supervisors.

And, as they sometimes had occasion to remind each other, this was a long-suffering soul who, with hardly any complaint, had to contend with a thankless marriage. How natural—and how saddening—that after a particularly bad session at home he should be led to seek solace in the bottle and so plainly show the effects at his desk the next morning. The more reason then to put on those bright and smiling faces for his comforting.

They were wrong in one regard.

What they did not know, because Mr. Ince kept the secret clutched tight to his bosom, was that when he turned to the bottle it was to drown nothing more or less than the frustrations of the failed creative artist. A devotee of murder mysteries, he had, over the long years, sent out a score of cleverly plotted murder tales to publishers from coast to coast. Those evenings when a cherished manuscript would appear in his mail on the rebound, the familiar *Sorry* appended to it, were the bad ones for Mr. Ince, the mornings after even worse.

But of course, as his ladies could attest, these hangovers were occasional small dark clouds passing through their sunshiny working days. Most often it was the sunshine that prevailed.

Then along came Mr. Ledbetter.

For some reason, people like to believe that in a small town everyone knows everyone else, which is a long way from the truth. The truth is that in a small town like Kandia Falls—population 20,000—everyone knows *about* everyone else who may be worth knowing about. Thus when Mr. Ledbetter suddenly appeared in the Hall of Records one fine morning, all present knew enough about him to be greatly surprised by this visit.

Mr. Ledbetter was rich, reclusive, and, at age fifty, as total a bachelor as one could be. Your true bachelor of fifty is seldom a big jolly fellow with carefree ways. Far from it, he is likely to be spare of build, prim of manner, and with a disposition to hypochondria.

So it was with Mr. Ledbetter, for good reason. An only child, the last of his line, delivered to his astonished and delighted parents

after they had long given up hope of becoming parents, he had been an ailing little creature, swathed almost to smothering in the cotton-batting of their adoration, privately educated so that he could be kept away from any possible contamination. When in the fullness of their years his parents died, the son took one quick look at the world he would have to contend with from the presidential suite of the Ledbetter National Bank, then placed the bank's affairs in the hands of capable surrogates and fled back to the spacious confines of the Ledbetter estate, a Victorian mansion surrounded by acres of lawn and garden on the far outskirts of town near the waters of Kandia Falls itself.

There, nursing a neurasthenic shyness, the estate in charge of a trusted houseman and whatever staff he chose to muster, Mr. Ledbetter devoted himself to a solitary life of gardening, extensive reading, coin collecting, and, of recent years, genealogical investigation of his forebears. Although he never entertained at home and was rarely seen in town, there was nothing of the misanthrope in him. An appeal to him by any respectable local cause would, if delivered by mail, be answered more than generously. In the end, although almost invisible to the community, he came to be well-regarded by it. Even the most calculating of those unmarried ladies who had seen in him the prize of a lifetime came to view his remote image with kindness once they understood that in this lottery there would be no tickets sold. That's the way he is, poor soul, they told each other, and took comfort in knowing they were all in the same boat.

Now here was Mr. Ledbetter standing at the counter of the Hall of Records and bearing a formal letter of introduction. The letter was from the State Commissioner of Records himself, was addressed to Mr. Ince, and was brief and to the point. Every possible courtesy was to be extended to Mr. Ledbetter, all possible assistance was to be provided him. The underlining of the *every* and the *all* gave the message an almost menacing authority.

No need for that. Mr. Ince was delighted with this turn of events, a personal contact with the town's most sought-after and elusive citizen. At his desk, railed off at the far end of the room, he patiently extracted from this tight-lipped visitor the nature of his business. In a nutshell, it was that Mr. Ledbetter was now engaged in preparing a definitive history of his once-extensive family from that time, a century before, when they had first homesteaded in the county and helped found the town of Kandia Falls.

So, said Mr. Ledbetter, to make sure that every detail of the

history was accurate, he must rely on these public files. Would need them at his fingertips for a few weeks. If that could be arranged without difficulty—

It could, indeed. On the strength of the letter from the Commissioner, a small table was commandeered from the laboratory of the County Farm Agency across the hall. A well-padded chair was carted up from the courtroom clerk's office downstairs. Room was made for these furnishings under the large window overlooking the town square, where any available sunlight would be behind Mr. Ledbetter's shoulder while he was at work. An added advantage to the location was that it was a good distance from the counter, thus assuring the historian a certain amount of privacy at his labors, and for this he was outspokenly grateful.

It took only a few days for all hands to familiarize themselves with their guest's routine. Ten o'clock each morning he would arrange the contents of a swollen briefcase on his table—notebooks, charts, and index cards—and go to work with a glassy-eyed concentration, sometimes approaching Mr. Ince with a list of required documents and plat books. Only Mr. Ince was approached, no one else. At noon there would be a break for lunch, a sandwich and a small Thermos of tea extracted from the briefcase, and then it was back to work with a vengeance. Four o'clock to the minute was departure time.

Mr. Ince, who had at first welcomed the arrangement, quickly came to detest it, for sound reasons. He had always run his department on the logical assumption that what you didn't do today was probably not worth doing tomorrow either. Now faced by someone across the room with a direct pipeline to the State Commissioner, he had to at least go through the motions. A gregarious spirit, he used to take pleasure in extended visits to old acquaintances in other departments. Now he was nailed down to his desk and, what was worse, the bottle locked in its bottom drawer could not be called on for support when needed.

Then there was the way Mr. Ledbetter remained so conspicuously aloof from the ladies on the staff, suggesting nothing so much as a Pilgrim Father on guard against a trio of threatening Jezebels. Since Miss McCurdy and Miss Schultz were well on in years and, to put it kindly, exceedingly plain of feature, and since Mrs. Rogers, while somewhat more pleasant-featured, was almost comically short and tubby, they might have found this rather flattering. But they did not. They were too level-headed for such nonsense. What they did

feel was a mounting resentment which, only out of regard for Mr. Ince, they tried to keep tightly bottled up.

The result, of course, was the collapse of the department's morale. Once the happiest of havens, the Hall of Records now became almost funereal in atmosphere.

To ease this situation, Mr. Ince several times deferentially asked Mr. Ledbetter to call on the ladies for information retrieval rather than lay all dependence on him. Each time, Mr. Ledbetter demonstrated a maddening stubbornness in his ways. "No, Mr. Ince. I prefer it this way."

"The ladies are extremely competent, Mr. Ledbetter."

"I am sure they are. But I prefer your services."

No solution there. The one and only solution to everything, Mr. Ince morosely told himself, would be provided by time itself. After all, it was only a matter of a few weeks before this interloper took his leave for keeps.

Indeed, after a few weeks, each as nerve-racking as the one that preceded it, Mr. Ledbetter's requests for documentation did become more and more infrequent. One day there were no requests at all. The historian, lost to the world, simply spent that day examining his notes, now and again nodding sober appreciation of them. Mr. Ince took pleased notice of this. Definitely, from the look of it, the moment of deliverance was near.

He went home that evening in comparatively high spirits. There, his wife, whose face was not often wreathed in smiles, greeted him with a face wreathed in smiles. The reason became clear when she handed him his mail, which she was honor-bound not to open. The envelope on top was from the publisher to whom Mr. Ince had sent his last novel, a wickedly contrived murder mystery where the least likely suspect, a gentle spinster, was, in fact, the murderer.

Mr. Ince opened the envelope with trembling fingers. Always before, it had been the bulky manuscript itself which had been returned to him, a rejection slip attached to it. Never before had a publisher acknowledged receipt of a manuscript in this form. What else could this signal but an acceptance? At the very least, keen interest.

Mr. Ince read the letter. *Sorry, but your novel is unacceptable. However, you neglected to enclose postage for its return. If you would kindly—*

When he gingerly seated himself at his desk the next morning the ladies instantly recognized the symptoms. Miss McCurdy hastily

brought aspirin, Miss Schultz brought a glass of ice water, Mrs. Rogers brought an empty paper cup for the one treatment in which he had any faith, a strong dose from the bottle in the desk. Some may argue against this hair-of-the-dog treatment, but, as Mr. Ince saw it during these crises, if all it offered was a quick and merciful death, so much the better.

By the time Mr. Ledbetter made his appearance the ladies were back at their duties, and Mr. Ince, elbows on desk and throbbing head buried in his hands, was brooding over the outrageous stupidity of publishers who didn't recognize a masterpiece when it was planted right in their hands. He put aside the subject as Mr. Ledbetter approached, for once not bearing the familiar briefcase. Mr. Ince felt a tiny spark of gratitude find its way through his monstrous *katzenjammer*.

Mr. Ledbetter seated himself beside the desk. He seemed extraordinarily pleased with the world. "Fine weather," he remarked.

"Very," said Mr. Ince with an effort.

The amenities attended to, Mr. Ledbetter got down to business. "You must know how helpful you've been to me in my project."

"Glad I could be."

"And I haven't made any problem for you, have I? Taking up space here?"

"No problem." Mr. Ince could see this was going to be one of those long farewells. "There's plenty of space here."

"Yes, that's how the Commissioner seemed to feel about it. I had him on the phone last night about my work plan. He saw it your way. Said to move right ahead with it."

Mr. Ince tried to grasp this. "Move ahead?"

"Well, I'm about to start on the writing of the history itself in a week or two. A publisher has just contracted for it. The State University Press."

Envy pierced Mr. Ince's bowels like a sawtoothed blade. "You mean your book is definitely going to be published?"

"Oh, definitely. I've already received part payment for it. And I've been so productive here—this workmanlike atmosphere, I suppose—that it struck me as wisdom to simply remain at that table until the job is done. There are too many distractions at home, you understand. None here. So for the year or two required—"

"You said a *year* or two?"

"At least. After all, this is to be the comprehensive study of literally dozens of people. And what complex and colorful people." Mr.

Ledbetter's voice became rich with scorn. "Believe me, you won't find their like nowadays. Nothing like them."

Mr. Ince stared at this insufferably self-assured, self-satisfied bane of his life through bloodshot eyes. Oblivious to his suffering, Miss McCurdy and Miss Schultz were at the counter casually tending to trade. Mrs. Rogers was at her desk, vigorously banging staples into some documents.

A madness seized Mr. Ince.

He leaned toward Mr. Ledbetter. "Can you keep a secret?"

"Yes, of course," Mr. Ledbetter said in some surprise.

"Well, then"—Mr. Ince aimed a forefinger—"see that little lady there? Our Mrs. Rogers?"

"Yes."

"A widow."

"Oh. I'm sorry."

"*She* isn't."

"I beg your pardon?"

"Happened five years ago in Chicago," said Mr. Ince, wildly improvising on his most recently rejected masterpiece. "Married to a big brute who liked to knock her about. One night she just picked up his shotgun and, cool as a cucumber, let him have both barrels. Blew his brains out."

Mr. Ledbetter looked stunned. "That woman?"

"Right."

Mr. Ledbetter was visibly paler. "But she's employed here. I mean, after something like that—"

"I told you, cool as a cucumber. Tried for murder, put on a weepy act, and the jury let her off scot-free. Justifiable homicide. It all came to me by mistake. A confidential report that should never have been released. *She* doesn't even know I know about it."

Mr. Ledbetter swallowed hard. "Incredible."

"Colorful, I'd call it. Colorful. And complex." Mr. Ince put a warning finger to his lips. "But remember. I have your word that this is as far as it goes."

"Yes," said Mr. Ledbetter weakly.

Mr. Ince watched with satisfaction as the historian departed on what were unquestionably shaky legs. Then he took the bottle from the desk drawer. The very least he owed himself was a victory toast.

His satisfaction lasted until he woke the next morning, a sense of doom now bearing down on him like an express train.

He clutched his head as he considered his plight. A joke, of course.

That's all it had been. But what in heaven's name had led him to play any such joke on a pompous ass who had the ear of the State Commissioner? If Mr. Ledbetter spilled the beans, there would be, at the very least, a thorough investigation of the office management here as reprisal, and it was not a management that could bear even cursory investigation. And there were those retirement benefits and the pension which in a few years were to free Mr. Ince to a full-time vocation as author. What would happen to them?

Just as bad, what about Mrs. Rogers herself? Let the word get out, and hungry lawyers would gather like sharks, slaving over this airtight case of slander.

First the departmental trial, then the criminal trial—there was the future. Or was it the other way around? Either way, it was the same future.

And what defense could be offered by the accused? Intoxication on the job? A mental disorder?

The one and only hope was that Mr. Ledbetter—now a perambulating time-bomb—had been sworn to secrecy and would abide by his oath. The odds on this, as Mr. Ince weighed them carefully, seemed favorable. Meanwhile, there was going to be a drastic change in office management, a cleaning up, reorganizing, and disciplining which, in the vent of an investigation, might have a soothing effect on the investigators.

Might.

Heavy-laden with his cares, Mr. Ince entered the office to be immediately surrounded by the ladies full of high excitement. They had a story to tell, and what a story. Miss McCurdy narrated it, Miss Schultz embellished it, and roly-poly Mrs. Rogers confirmed it along the way with smiles and nods.

It seemed that as soon as Mrs. Rogers had arrived home from work yesterday she had received a call from Mr. Ledbetter, an invitation to dine with him at the Kandia Falls Lodge, no less. She had been much taken aback, had hesitated, and then, as Mr. Ledbetter persisted, she had yielded. So there she had been, seated at the very best table in the very best dining room in town, a place patronized only by the very best people, and didn't they goggle at this unprecedented sight being offered them.

Even with that embarrassment, however, it had been a most pleasant time, so pleasant, indeed, that there had been an invitation to dinner tonight as well, and Mrs. Rogers had guilelessly accepted it on the spot. Plainly, guile, and whatever strategy it might dictate

to the skilled matchmaker, was not for Mrs. Rogers.

At his desk, Mr. Ince sat hunched up in misery brooding over this undreamed of and catastrophic development. Irony of ironies, he himself had played Cupid to the couple. He had provided Mrs. Rogers with her credentials. Because Mr. Ledbetter, that confirmed bachelor, that supreme misogynist, having rejected every genteel and proper lady who ever pursued him, had now been knocked right off his pins by the image of a smiling, cool-as-a-cucumber murderess. On second thought, or even third or fourth, why not? Lucrezia Borgia had never lacked for suitors, had she?

With a panicky feeling that time was of the essence in establishing his second line of defense, Mr. Ince gathered the ladies together and coldly advised them that from now on they would be sailing aboard a very tight ship. He then explained at length what, in terms of the Kandia Falls Hall of Records, a very tight ship was. Miss McCurdy and Miss Schultz received this grumpily, plainly feeling betrayed by an old friend. On the other hand, Mrs. Rogers was vague in response, euphoric in manner, her thoughts evidently far away.

As the office underwent its transformation in the days that followed, the reason for the euphoria became obvious. Mr. Ledbetter was conducting a whirlwind courtship of his Lucrezia Borgia. All her available time was claimed by him. Even his precious book had been laid aside while he plotted new diversions, new excursions for her pleasure.

There was never any real question of where the courtship was heading; the only question was when it would get there. To Mr. Ince it was the waiting for the inevitable that was ulcerating him, and all the hard work he was sharing with his staff couldn't ease the pangs. Too imaginative for his own good perhaps, he kept visualizing that scene once the marital vows had been taken.

A bedroom scene. The Ledbetter bedroom.

The new Mrs. Ledbetter: "Why are you staring at me so strangely, dear?"

Mr. Ledbetter: "Because now that you're mine, there's something I dare to ask you. Mr. Ince confided to me the fascinating story of how you did away with your first husband. What I've been wondering—"

That was as far as it went each time. The rest was too grisly to contemplate.

What all this was doing to him was finally summed up by the long-suffering Mrs. Ince who told him in some heat that he was

becoming impossible to live with. Miss McCurdy and Miss Schultz, toiling to bring order to dusty and long-forgotten office files, eschewed the words but let him know through expressive body language how heartily they agreed with this sentiment. The sole consolation was that Mrs. Rogers, toiling away as valiantly as her colleagues, seemed to be living in a world of her own, and it was only fitful consolation. Sooner or later, Mr. Ince warned himself, the wedding announcement would pop up in his mail, and into his mind would pop yet another replay of that nightmarish bedroom scene.

The announcement was not delivered by mail. Close to lunch hour one noon, it was delivered by Mrs. Rogers herself.

Mr. Ince, hard at work deciphering some waterstained birth certificates, became aware that she was standing beside him silently demanding his attention. The proximity made him nervous. He sat back as far as he could on his chair. "Yes?" he said warily.

Mrs. Rogers explained apologetically that this was goodbye. Really goodbye, her formal resignation from the Service now on its way to Personnel. Because to avoid public commotion, she and Mr. Ledbetter were slipping away in very few minutes to be wed out of town and so begin a long honeymoon abroad. Even the girls—the ladies always referred to each other in the plural as "the girls"—didn't know about it yet. Indeed, the longer the news was delayed, the better.

"I see," said Mr. Ince numbly. "Of course." He tried to rise to the occasion. "Well," he said, "good luck to you. And to Mr. Ledbetter."

"Thank you. But there's a little favor I must ask. It has to do with that strange story you made up about me."

Mr. Ince gaped at her. "He told you about it?"

"Last night. He was," said Mrs. Rogers, "most sympathetic."

Mr. Ince flung his arms wide in appeal. "Believe me—" he stammered. "I assure you—"

"And I told him," said Mrs. Rogers gravely, "that this subject was just too painful for me. I made him promise never to mention it again. Never. Not to me or anyone else. Now will you make me that same promise?"

Mr. Ince found himself incapable of speech. But he could nod his head. He nodded it in a daze.

"Thank you," said Mrs. Rogers. She suddenly leaned forward and gave him a quick little peck on the cheek. "Oh, I do thank you for everything," she whispered in his ear, and then she was out the door and gone.

a **NEW** short story by

JAMES HOLDING

What is card sense? Superior observation and inferences therefrom? Studying and interpreting the mannerisms of your opponents? Or is there "a little touch of ESP, perhaps"? And can that ESP or card sense, or whatever you may call it, work at long distance—from hundreds of miles away? . . . A delightful and clever gambling story . . .

CARD SENSE

by **JAMES HOLDING**

Although I readily admit that I earn my livelihood by means not usually considered honest, I like to think I am not an entirely unredeemed human being.

For one thing, I never cheat at poker.

Not because I have scruples against it, of course. Not at all. But rather, because I consider it contemptibly picayune as well as physically dangerous if one happens to be caught at it. Besides—and I confess this with all due modesty—I am an exceptionally observant poker player and do not normally find it in the least necessary to stoop to cheating in order to win handsomely at the game.

In my experience, careful observation of one's opponents contributes infinitely more to winning at poker than does the fickle jade affectionately known to many gamblers as Lady Luck. Give me an hour or two of play in which to observe my fellow gamblers as they draw, bet, raise, call, hold, or fold, and I can usually detect, from their individual mannerisms in correlation to the hands they ultimately expose, a pretty good evaluation of the cards they hold. Such individual mannerisms are valuable clues which the keen observer can interpret to his profit.

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For example, a sudden attentiveness of posture after a draw, an increase in a player's volubility, a more than usual eagerness to get on with the betting—all these may signal a good hand. A slight increase in the loudness of a certain player's voice, a tiny thread of strain in another's tone may be a clear signal that he is bluffing. Some players, when they plan to raise or call, will unconsciously fiddle with their stacks of chips, or hold their hands with unnatural rigidity. You see what I mean?

Anyway, my name is Henry Carmichael.

At home my colleagues and friends call me "Professor" as a satirical comment on my scholarly speech and my one year of higher education at Dartmouth College.

The five men gathered with me around the poker table in Naples, Florida, that night were neither colleagues nor friends—merely five congenial companions with whom I had played golf occasionally during the two weeks of my annual vacation, and who had invited me to help them improve the evening with a little poker while their wives attended a fashion show in one of the public rooms of the Colony Sands Hotel.

Actually, they were a bit above me, socially and financially, these friendly fellows. Stainton, vice president of a steel company; Corrigan, ex-chairman of an insurance company; Hoblitzel, a Detroit pediatrician; Lasher, a retired broker; and Bellamy, our host, who, I gathered, had been something rather important in the trucking industry.

We had been playing for two hours and I was, as usual, comfortably ahead. It was a comparatively modest game for such tycoons as my opponents—ten-dollar limit with only three raises permitted. In spite of that, I estimated the chips in front of me might add up to winnings of perhaps ten or eleven hundred dollars.

We took a short break around ten o'clock to freshen our drinks and sample the sandwiches that Bellamy had hospitably provided. Lasher looked at my stacks of chips and said, "Henry, how do you do it?"

"Do what?"

"Win so consistently?"

I shrugged modestly. "Just lucky, I suppose."

Lasher shook his head. "I guess luck accounts for some of it, of course, but I have this odd feeling, watching you play tonight, that you can actually sense beforehand whether you'll draw the cards you want."

I smiled. "That sounds like a definition of cheating."

"I don't mean that," Lasher hastened to apologize. "I'm certain you're not cheating, Henry. What I mean is—"

Hoblitzel spoke up. "What you mean is, Henry has exceptionally acute perceptions where cards are concerned, right? An extra helping of card sense, in other words."

"That's it," Lasher said. "What about it, Henry?"

I waved a deprecatory hand. "An extra helping of card sense? Well, yes, I suppose you could say that. Or even a little touch of ESP, perhaps. Because with me, it sometimes seems to go beyond mere card sense in the accepted meaning of the term."

"Like how?" Bellamy asked.

"In that last hand we played, for example, I felt a definite, though inexplicable, premonition that I would draw the king that gave me a full house. Hence my aggressive raising before the draw when I had nothing but two pair. I felt certain I would fill. And I did."

"Who can win against a guy with second sight?" Stainton said in mock disgust. "Deal me out of this game, friends. If Henry can read the future—"

I sipped my drink. "I can't, really," I said. "Only occasionally. Very, very occasionally. And then only in draw poker."

"How does your card sense work with stud?" Corrigan asked. "Maybe we'd better switch to dealer's choice."

There was general laughter in which I joined. Then I said ruefully, "My card sense, as you call it, is more an embarrassment to me than anything else. I don't understand it. And I really don't want it. But I am afraid there is nothing I can do about it. It runs in my family, like hemophilia or twins."

Lasher said, "Everybody in your family has ESP?"

"No, not everybody, thank God. But somebody in each generation seems to come up with it. My own card sense is minuscule when compared with that of a niece of mine in Indianapolis." I spread my hands in a wide gesture. "She's truly incredible."

"With cards?" Hoblitzel asked. "Like you?"

I nodded. "With one important added improvement, as the ads say. Her ESP, or card sense, or whatever, works over long distances."

Silence. At length Bellamy said, "All right, Henry, I can go along with a gag. What do you mean, 'long distances'?"

"Hundreds of miles," I replied. "Don't ask me to explain it, because I can't."

"Wow!" exclaimed Stainton. He slapped his knee. "That does it,

for me. Card sense I'll accept. But *long-distance* card sense? No way!"

Hoblitzel, who must have studied some aspects of the subject while in medical school, murmured. "There *have* been instances of it, Jerry."

"Name one," Stainton said.

"Well, if I remember correctly," Hoblitzel said, "some researcher at Duke University or somewhere claims he has known primitive Australian bushmen, the aborigines of the outback, to communicate mentally with each other while physically separated by two thousand miles of desert."

"Nuts!" said Lasher. "Where'd you hear that fairy story?" Then to me, "You're kidding, aren't you, Henry?"

I shook my head. "No," I said earnestly and a little apologetically, "I'm not. I've known my niece to identify correctly a card drawn from a deck of cards by a stranger five hundred miles away."

At this there was a moment of dead silence, as though I had uttered an obscenity at a church picnic. Finally Lasher cleared his throat and said, "No reflection on you or your niece, Henry, but that's pure unadulterated hogwash, if you'll pardon a contradiction in terms." He reached out a hand and cut the deck of cards on the table before him, turning up the four of diamonds. "You are trying to tell me that your niece in Indianapolis could identify this four of diamonds by ESP, even though she's hundreds of miles away?"

"I am not trying to tell you anything," I said wearily. I hitched my chair closer to the table. "Why don't we get on with our game? Whose deal is it?"

"Wait a minute," Corrigan said slowly. "Let's not overlook the fact that Henry here has demonstrated his own superior card sense tonight by winning a lot of money from us as easily as though we were children who had never played poker before." He flashed the other players a conspiratorial look which I pretended not to see. "So maybe he's being honest with us about his niece." He eyed me curiously, half intrigued, half suspicious. "How does she do this remote control ESP trick, Henry? Do you help her? By broadcasting thought waves to her in the form of the four of diamonds, perhaps?" He laughed.

"I have nothing to do with it," I said with ill-concealed impatience. "I told you, I don't understand how she does it and I don't want to. All I know is that she *can* do it."

Bellamy said baldly, "I don't believe it, Henry. I'm sorry, but I

just don't believe it." He winked at Corrigan. Again, I pretended not to notice. "I'm willing to bet you anything it's utterly impossible." There was a faint undertone of challenge beneath the raillery.

I sighed. "I'm sorry I mentioned my niece," I said. "I had no intention of starting an argument, believe me."

"You haven't started an argument," Corrigan said. "What you've done is to arouse our betting blood, Henry. I agree with Joe that it's impossible for anyone to identify correctly a card cut from a deck that's hundreds of miles away. I'm willing to bet on it, too."

Stainton raised a hand. "I'd like to have a small piece of that action."

I sighed again, more deeply than before. "I don't want to take your money," I protested. "You're betting against something I know is a sure thing."

"Wait a minute," Lasher said. "You can't leave me out of this. But before I make any bets, I want to know just how we put your niece to the test?"

"We call her on the telephone," I said, "and ask her what card you just cut."

"Oho!" Lasher crowed. "I'm beginning to get it now." He gave me a mock-knowing look. "When you telephone your niece, you give her some sort of signal that tips her off to the four of diamonds. A prearranged signal. Right?"

"Wrong," I said. "You put in the call. Or have the hotel switchboard place it for you. Do it anyway you like. Then you talk to my niece yourself. I'll stay out of it. You don't even mention my name, although the chances are she'll guess who's put you up to calling her. She's been called a few times before"—I smiled around at them—"by other skeptical card players like you."

"You won't go near the phone? You won't say a word?" Corrigan said.

"Not a word."

"That's good enough for me," Hoblitzel said. "I never did believe that ESP jazz about the Australian bushmen. I'll take a piece of the bet, too. How much, Henry?"

I counted the chips stacked in front of me, an action commonly considered an augury of ill fortune to follow. "This is foolishness," I said. "However—" I finished my counting. "I seem to have won just over a thousand dollars from you tonight. So shall we say two hundred dollars apiece? If you insist on betting, that is. Personally I'd rather play poker. That's what we're here for."

"I think I detect a slight attack of cold feet, Henry," Bellamy said.

"You can't back out now," Lasher said, rubbing his hands. "Two hundred is great with me, Henry. Okay with the rest of you guys?"

His four friends chorused their agreement.

"The phone's there beside you," Bellamy said to Lasher.

Lasher reached for it. "Here we go," he said. "What's your niece's name, Henry? And her address? Or do you have her telephone number?"

"Her name's Pamela Rogers. And her telephone number is—" I got out my wallet and rummaged in it until I found the folded scrap of paper bearing Pamela's telephone number. I read it off to Lasher.

"What if she's not home?" he asked as he lifted the receiver.

I shrugged. "You'll save two hundred bucks apiece," I said.

Lasher asked the switchboard operator for an outside line and dialed Pamela's number himself. Faintly, as he held the receiver away from his ear so that the rest of us could hear, came the distant ringing of Pamela's phone in Indianapolis. On the fifth ring we could all hear a click as the receiver was lifted. A female voice said, "Hello?"

Lasher said, "Is this Pamela Rogers?"

"Yes," came the crisp reply.

"My name is Lasher. And I'm calling—"

Pamela broke in, "What? Who did you say? Dasher? I don't know you, do I? Are you calling long distance? You sound so far away. Or else this is a rotten connection."

"Lasher," Lasher said, "with an 'L'. I'm calling you from Naples, Florida, Miss Rogers, to ask if you'll be good enough to settle a bet that I've made with a friend of mine—"

"Hold it!" Pamela said. "This friend of yours wouldn't happen to be my Uncle Henry, would it?"

"Could be," Lasher said cautiously.

"I thought so! And I suppose he's in trouble again?"

Lasher flashed a glance at me. "What do you mean in trouble again, Miss Rogers?"

"You're playing poker with him, right? And he's a big winner, isn't he? So somebody in the game suspects him of cheating, and Uncle Henry gives you his song and dance about having superior card sense. And you don't quite believe him. So he uses me to prove that unusually keen card sense *does* run in his family, right?"

"Well . . ." Lasher hesitated. "Something like that, yes. Only we don't believe your uncle is cheating. He's not in any trouble at all.

This is just a friendly bet, Miss Rogers, and we'd appreciate it if you could help us settle it."

We could hear an exaggerated sigh of irritation at the other end of the line.

"Okay," Pamela said, "I'll try. But this is absolutely the last time. Tell Uncle Henry that, will you? I'm sick and tired of having him make me out as some kind of a freak!"

Lasher laughed and said, "I'll tell him, all right. And thank you for being so accommodating. Now then: I've just drawn a card from our deck here, and the bet is that you can identify it, even though you're in Indianapolis and we're in Florida. So can you tell me which card I've drawn?"

A hush descended on us. We held our collective breath until Pamela said tentatively, "Uh . . . yes, I probably can. But give me a minute, you're awfully far away for me to get any vibes. So far, it isn't clear at all." She said nothing more for a long moment, then plaintively, "It isn't coming through, Mr. Rasher. I'm terribly sorry."

I counted five triumphant expressions flitting simultaneously across the faces of Lasher, Corrigan, Stainton, Hoblitzel, and Belamy.

Lasher almost chortled. "We're sorry, too, Miss Rogers. At least, your Uncle Henry is sorry, I'm sure." A thread of quite ungentlemanly malice crept into his voice. "It was very good of you to try, anyway."

"Wait a minute," Pamela said, "don't hang up yet. Will you hold on a minute while I get a cigarette? Smoking helps me to concentrate for some funny reason."

"Sure, go ahead," said Lasher blandly. "I'll hold on." He put his hand over the telephone mouthpiece and said to us with a snicker, "She's gone to get a cigarette to help her concentrate. Did you hear that?"

We nodded. "Give her a chance," I said. "She may surprise you yet."

Corrigan said jovially, "Two hundred more says she doesn't."

I shook my head.

"Chicken," Stainton said.

Lasher, holding the phone, said, "It's taking her a hell of a long time to find a cigarette, it seems to me."

"Maybe she had to run down to the corner store for a new pack," Hoblitzel suggested, smiling.

"Probably can't find her lighter," I hazarded. "She's a great one

for mislaying things."

"Including her ESP," Lasher said smugly. "You suppose she just left me on 'hold' and went back to bed, maybe?"

"She wouldn't do that," I said. "Not Pamela. Give her another minute or two."

"This is a long-distance call, for God's sake!" Corrigan said. "If she doesn't get back to us pretty soon, the charges will eat up our profit!"

At this bit of infantile humor everybody laughed loudly, including me.

The seconds ticked by, each one seeming of inordinate length. Corrigan built himself another drink. Hoblitzel sat quietly, tapping his fingers on the table. Bellamy urged Stainton to have another sandwich. Lasher yawned.

Then, suddenly, he snapped to attention. "Here she is!" he said out of the corner of his mouth. He uncovered the mouthpiece of the phone. "We were beginning to think you'd left us for good, Miss Rogers. Couldn't you find your cigarettes?" Slight rallying tone.

"Yes, but not my lighter," Pamela said. "I'm sorry to be so long. I'm all set now." The sound of a woman exhaling cigarette smoke from deep in her lungs came to us quite clearly over the line. Pamela said, "There, that's better. Isn't it peculiar how a cigarette seems to help? It's coming through to me much clearer, now, Mr. Lasher. Oh, yes . . . now I can see it. I think the card you drew from the deck is . . ." She paused and blew smoke noisily.

"Is what?" Lasher demanded. "What card did I draw?"

"It's the four of diamonds, isn't it?" Pamela asked.

To say that my companions were thunderstruck is to minimize the shock effect of thunder. They were stunned, frozen into immobility by surprise and incredulity. For a moment we all sat like statues, staring at Lasher and the phone in his hand. At length he said very quietly indeed, "Thank you, Miss Rogers," and hung up as gingerly as though he were placing a heavy boulder on a fragile piece of window glass. "Did you hear that?" he whispered. "She said the four of diamonds."

Another long moment went by in silence. Then Hoblitzel gave me a crooked grin and said, "Henry, you're the first Australian bushman I ever played poker with. Here's your two hundred."

When I returned home a week later, I met Dixie at the Elite Cocktail Lounge to present her with her share of the loot. As she

entered the café and swivel-hipped her graceful way toward the booth in which I awaited her with a martini in front of me, she seemed the very embodiment of wholesome, unsophisticated young innocence—the last person in the world one would suspect of harboring larceny in her heart. I realized once more how fortunate I was to have won her friendship—and on many occasions, her expert cooperation.

I stood up to greet her. "Miss Pamela Rogers, I presume," I said, bowing from the waist.

She dimpled at me. "The same, Professor," she answered, bowing in her turn. She sat down, waited until the waitress had brought her a frozen daiquiri, then asked brightly, "You have something for me, Professor?"

I passed her an envelope containing \$500 in cash. She thrust the envelope into her shoulder bag without even counting the money. Dixie is the only person I know who completely trusts me.

We raised our glasses in a congratulatory toast to each other. Then I said, "So you took up smoking the minute I left town?"

She twinkled at me. "You mean the 'cigarette-to-help-me-concentrate' bit that I laid on your friend Mr. Dasher or Smasher or whatever his name was?"

"That was just a stall for time," Dixie said. "We had an ice storm up here that night you wouldn't believe, Professor. It downed a lot of power lines and blacked us out for over an hour, just when your friend called. So I had to stall while I tried to remember where I'd left my flashlight." She took a sip of her daiquiri. "And you know how I am about mislaying things. Did the wait make you nervous?"

I patted her hand. In our prearranged code of four surnames to designate the four suits in a deck of cards, and thirteen first names to denote the different cards in each suit, the name "Pamela Rogers" instantly identified the four of diamonds—except, alas, to Dixie, whose memory is as unreliable as mine is photographic. Wherefore I had prepared a written list of our code names for Dixie to keep conveniently beside her telephone for ready reference when a call like Mr. Lasher's came in. "Did the wait make me nervous?" I said. "I haven't stopped shaking yet. I thought you'd mislaid our name sheet!"

"Q"

a **NEW John Jericho story by**

HUGH PENTECOST

John Jericho, painter-detective, artist-avenger, a Viking of a man in size and strength, is the Good Samaritan of contemporary sleuths. For a long time violence has been a part of his everyday life, and he deals with it on canvas and in action. And when a man as close to him as a brother is the victim, Jericho intensifies his unending struggle against evil . . .

JERICHO AND THE ASSASSIN

by HUGH PENTECOST

66 **D**o you have the faintest idea what the hell time of night it is?" Jericho asked, his voice thick with sleep and outrage.

"Johnny, there is big trouble," the woman's voice said.

Jericho was still coming to the surface from a deep oblivion. He had been on a work binge, a painting binge. When the work fever was on him he could go a couple of times round the clock without ever thinking of sleep. Then, when the time came, he would drop down on the huge double bed in his Jefferson Mews studio and be gone, far out, far away.

This time the phone had awakened him.

It was dark, except for the faint glow of street lights visible in the skylight over his easel in the next room. He couldn't have been out for long, because it had been after midnight when he'd turned out the fluorescent light over a finished painting and groped his way, tired almost beyond endurance, to his bed and passed out like a drunkard.

The phone had persisted and he'd finally fumbled for it and almost shouted his question. The woman's voice was familiar but for a moment he couldn't place it, so almost drugged-like had been his sleep.

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"Lyman has been shot," the woman's voice said.

Jericho sat bolt upright on the bed. He realized he hadn't bothered to undress before he dropped down and plunged into a blessed darkness.

"Laura?"

"Yes. Oh, my God, Johnny!"

"Shot? Where, what happened?"

"He was making a speech at a political rally for Senator Munson. A man standing not six feet away from Lyman shot him."

"Get away?"

"No. There was a man standing right next to the killer. He hit him with a beer bottle. The killer's dead."

"And Lyman?"

"He's in the intensive care unit of St. Vincent's Hospital. It's only a few blocks from you, Johnny."

"How bad is it?"

Laura Trask's voice broke. "The—the doctor says I should pray for him not to make it."

"Not make it?"

"If he makes it, the doctor says, he would be nothing more than a—than a vegetable."

"On my way," Jericho said.

John Jericho is a giant of a man, six feet four inches tall and weighing 240 well conditioned pounds. He has red hair, worn rather long, a red beard and mustache. He looks a little like a Viking warrior out of an earlier century. He is a man of deep passions, fierce angers, and yet a man of compassion and warmth for the people he loves. Lyman Rockwell was as close to Jericho as any other man he knew.

Jericho, an artist, had spent the more recent years of his life traveling the face of the earth, painting with almost frightening brilliance the evidence of man's inhumanity to man wherever he saw it. Violence had been a part of his everyday life for a long time, but the people he painted, destroyed by wars and revolutions and rebellions, by senseless violence and crime, were impersonal, except in the sense that he felt deeply about all humanity. Lyman Rockwell was something else again. Lyman was close, intimate. Lyman was like a brother.

They had met more than ten years ago at the Democratic convention in Chicago, where the air smelled of hate, where protesting

young people were beaten in the streets. Jericho had painted what he saw. Lyman Rockwell, a lawyer on the Attorney General's staff in Washington, had been there to observe what the authorities had been warned would happen. Lyman was excited and moved by the angry, brilliant sketches of the street riots that Jericho drew. They were to become part of his report to Washington.

They ate together, Jericho and Lyman, drank together, shared their views on what they were seeing and feeling. A mutual kinship grew between them. Jericho continued his nomad travels, reporting to the world what he saw, more vividly than any camera could do. Lyman stayed in Washington, watching how the world goes round behind the scenes. They stayed in touch, seeing each other when they could, sharing their observations, their mutual respect and affection deep and strong.

Lyman a vegetable? Never! Not conceivable!

One of the intimacies Jericho knew about was the lawyer's relationship with Laura Trask. That relationship bore on another, a tragic one. Lyman's wife was in a mental institution, in a hopeless and helpless condition. Laura Trask, a newspaper woman on the Washington scene, had come into Lyman's life and become a part of it in the most personal way. They were in love, but they kept it very much to themselves. Jericho was one of the few people who knew how close Lyman and Laura were, who spent time with them and shared their happiness. It was entirely natural that Laura should cry out to Jericho for help in this moment of horror.

Irony of ironies, at the moment of this attack on Lyman Rockwell by an assassin, Lyman was special counsel to a Senate Committee on Assassinations, going back into the dark cloud that had hung over the nation for some sixteen years, starting with the deaths of John F. Kennedy, Martin Luther King, and Robert Kennedy, and the shooting and crippling of Governor George Wallace of Alabama. There are still people who aren't convinced that those acts of violence were each the work of a single, sick psychotic. The word "conspiracy" refuses to die, and it was Lyman Rockwell's job to settle the issue, one way or the other, and for the senators on the committee to make a final, irreversible report.

Jericho walked the few blocks to the hospital. "Walk" may not be the right word. He strode along the pavement, his eyes blazing with anger. The few people about in that early dawn light turned to look at him, instinctively aware that here was a man on his way to some violent encounter.

But who was there for Jericho to encounter? The man who had shot Lyman Rockwell had been killed by a bystander. The only thing Jericho could do, he thought at the time, was to comfort a woman, sick with anxiety about the outcome for her lover.

A vegetable? Not possible!

Yet that was the prognosis Jericho got from the doctor at St. Vincent's who was fighting for Lyman's survival. He had found Laura waiting, dazed, in an anteroom outside the emergency section of the hospital. She had moved into Jericho's firm embrace, weeping. The story came out, in bits and pieces, from Laura between outbursts of hysteria. The arrival of a friend, warm and compassionate, had broken her control over her emotions. Senator Ted Munson, defeated in the regular election in November, was campaigning in a special primary to regain his seat, become vacant through the death of Senator Gurn. He had arranged for a special rally on the steps of the New York Public Library at 42nd Street and Fifth Avenue. Among the people who had agreed to speak for him was Lyman Rockwell. Lyman and Munson were old Washington friends. It had been a beautiful afternoon, and a large crowd had gathered on the terraces outside the library. Laura was there, watching her man.

"He had just stepped forward to speak," Laura told Jericho. "Lyman is popular with the man in the street, you know. People see him as a champion of justice and fair play. I heard a gunshot, and I saw his face—kind of dissolve. People were screaming and shouting. I—I didn't see the assassin, but as I tried to force my way forward I saw a man beating someone over the head with a bottle. It seems this man—his name is Sam Donovan—was standing right next to the assassin, drinking beer from a bottle. He used the bottle to beat the assassin to death before the crowd could drag him off. I—I didn't pay much attention to them. I was trying to fight my way to Lyman who was lying on the library steps. I thought he must be dead, but he wasn't. They brought him here. The doctor—oh, my God, Johnny."

The doctor, a pale young man looking close to exhaustion, spelled it out for Jericho a little later.

"There are times," Dr. Codman told Jericho, "when I am sorely tempted to ignore my Hippocratic oath. Fighting to keep your friend alive is against all reason, all compassion, all decent kindness. He will be the source of nightmares for me for a long time to come—if I succeed."

"That bad?"

"Hopeless, as far as any human functioning is concerned," the

doctor said. "He would be much better off dead—much more decent to let him die—."

"Can I see him?"

"I advise against it," the doctor said. "His face is destroyed beyond recognition. He's not conscious, and if he were he wouldn't know you." He shook his head. "I can imagine how frustrating it must be not to exact punishment from someone. But after all, the would-be assassin is dead."

"I wonder," Jericho said.

The doctor looked at Jericho, his eyebrows raised in an unspoken question. He got no answer. Jericho seemed to be staring into space.

The real murderer is not always the man who pulls the trigger. That had been a theory of Lyman Rockwell's, expressed to Jericho on many occasions.

"Oswald, a known fanatic, shoots John Kennedy," Lyman said. "But is that all there was to it? Oswald had associations with Russians, Cubans. Had they selected him to do the job for them, playing on his psychoses? The Russians and Cubans were both eager to punish the President for his handling of the missile crisis, for the Bay of Pigs. And James Earl Ray, who first pleads guilty to killing Martin Luther King and then tries to change his plea. It's as though he expected help he didn't get, and then tried to save himself. The boy who shot Bob Kennedy, the boy who crippled George Wallace—always some crazy, erratic nut. I can never shake the feeling, John, that these killers were only the instruments of death, not the planners, not the plotters."

"It can be over in five minutes, it can go on forever," Dr. Codman said. His mouth was twisted in a bitter smile. "There is no reason for you not to go somewhere for coffee, friend. Whether it's five minutes or forever, he won't ever know that you're here, or that you care, or, for that matter, that you ever existed."

So Laura and Jericho went around the corner from the hospital to some nameless place where they had coffee. Jericho added eggs and bacon and toast and juice to his order. You have to stoke the engine, no matter what your loss, what your grief. For Laura the day held no future, nor did any other day. For Jericho the days ahead had the same future they'd always had, a ceaseless war against violence.

"Did Lyman ever talk about the possibility of violence against him?" Jericho asked, over his second cup of coffee.

Laura was smoking a cigarette in quick nervous drags. "Nothing specific," she said. "I mean, people who fight crime are always the targets for criminals. He knew that. But I don't think there had been any threats. I don't think he had the idea that any particular person was out to get him. What are we to do for him, Johnny, if he survives and is—is nothing?"

"That's a question to be answered when the time comes that an answer is needed," Jericho said. "Meanwhile—"

"Meanwhile what, Johnny?"

"Meanwhile I'm going to try to make certain that the man who killed Lyman was just some nut nursing a private grievance and not a gun paid for by someone else."

"You think that's possible?"

"Lyman taught me to think that way," Jericho said.

The day had begun with a shock for the people in New York who were hurrying to work on the subways and buses, and in taxis. Big headlines in the newspapers topped stories about the attempt on the life of Lyman Rockwell. News voices on the radio blared out the grim information about the terrible future in store for the brilliant young attorney. There had been TV cameras on the scene, there to cover the rally for Senator Munson. There was now an imperishable record on film of just what had happened.

According to the papers Jericho carried back to his studio on Jefferson Mews, the would-be assassin's name was Bo Lukens. He had been 23 years old with a long criminal record as a juvenile and young adult. He had preyed on old people carrying their Social Security money to the supermarkets; he had been charged with assault; he had been suspected of setting fire to a dance hall, a fire that had cost a dozen lives, but he had been released for lack of sufficient evidence to justify a trial.

Lukens was a man, Jericho thought, so hooked on violence that he might easily have let himself be induced to murder for hire. Violence was as essential to Bo Lukens as drugs to an addict. How to trace back his life to someone who would pay to have Lyman Rockwell eliminated?

The other character in the cast, the man who had slugged Bo Lukens to death with a beer bottle, was something of a hero on this first day after the tragedy. His name was Sam Donovan, aged 32, a driver for a trucking firm. That day had been his day off. He had been window-shopping along Fifth Avenue and he'd stopped in front

of the library to see what the crowd was all about. It had been a hot day in the city, and he'd stopped in a grocery store to buy a cold bottle of beer.

He'd got to the front of the crowd, Donovan told reporters, had listened to some speaker, and then watched Lyman Rockwell step forward to the microphones.

"This guy was standing right in front of me," Donovan told reporters. "I wasn't paying any attention to him till I heard him make a kind of animal sound. That sound made me look at him, and I saw him raise the gun—a hand-gun. I guess I froze, because I wasn't quick enough to stop him from pulling the trigger. But I'd lifted the beer bottle I was carrying and I brought it down on his head a fraction of a second after he fired. I was that close to stopping him."

"And you went on hitting him," a reporter said.

"I got one look at Rockwell's face and I knew he was done for. I guess that kind of threw me off my rocker, and I just kept slugging him and slugging him till some guys pulled me away."

"You'd never seen Bo Lukens before?"

"Never. He was just someone in the crowd."

"I guess it all makes you something of a hero, Mr. Donovan."

"I only wish I could have reacted a little quicker."

There were pictures of both men in the papers. There were three different shots of Donovan in *The Times*, the *News*, and the *Post*, taken by three different photographers at the scene. They showed Donovan to be a rather pleasant-looking man with a boyish smile. The three papers all used the same pictures of Bo Lukens, the dead assassin. They were the mug shots out of some prison records, a profile with a number under it, and a straight-on shot with the same number under it. The black eyes, set too close together, in that head-on shot, Jericho thought, were the eyes of a disturbed man.

The reporters' accounts of what had happened at the rally weren't good enough for Jericho. He wanted to see for himself what had happened. He called a friend at CBS Television News and asked to see the film that had been televised on millions of home screens. About an hour later he found himself in a private projection room at CBS, watching not only the news film that had been telecast to the public, but also much more film that had been edited out of the final release.

All the film had a basic flaw in it from Jericho's point of view. The camera had been at the library to cover a rally. The cameraman had not expected any kind of special action. He had focused on

Lyman Rockwell as he came forward to the microphone, holding up his hands to silence the applause so that he could speak. There was no sound of a shot—it was drowned out by the noise of the crowd. But Laura had said she'd seen Lyman's face "dissolve." It was an accurate description of a shocking moment.

The film showed Lyman tumbling down on the stone steps. But then there was a gap, a key gap. In the film that was telecast, the camera turned quickly to the picture of Sam Donovan being dragged away from Bo Lukens whom he had just beaten to death with his beer bottle. In the not-used film there was evidence of the cameraman's frantic search, with his lens, for where the action was. He had never got a picture of Lukens firing at Lyman or of Donovan's first assault on the assassin. Before and after the fact the camera had caught everything, but not the fact itself. There could have been something important there, Jericho thought, something that had been lost forever.

It was in the early afternoon, back in Jericho's studio in the Mews, when his phone rang.

"John? It's Seth Demond," a man's voice said.

Jericho had met Seth Demond during another time of violence, during the riots at the Attica prison some years back. Demond had been one of the office personnel at Attica. Jericho had latched onto him for moment-to-moment information about what was happening inside the prison walls. They had become friends, in a casual way.

"I know what the hit on Lyman Rockwell must mean to you," Demond said. "You and he were close."

"Damned close."

"How is he doing?"

"Not well. It may be better if he dies."

"I'm sorry," Demond said. "There's something I've just passed on to the police that I thought you might like to know about."

"Oh?"

"After Attica I was transferred to Weymouth, another high-security prison. One of our guests was Mike Mora."

"The Syndicate gangster?"

"Yes. You know that it was Lyman who prosecuted Mora and sent him to jail?"

"I guess I knew."

"Well, I saw the pictures in the paper this morning and I recognized the guy. He came to visit Mora half a dozen times while he was at Weymouth."

There it was, Jericho thought. Mora with a deep-seated hatred of Lyman, and crazy Lukens his friend. The plan, long laid, had finally been carried out.

"For God's sake, Seth, if we'd only known that in advance we might have saved Lyman from Lukens."

"Hold the fort," Demond said. "I think you've misunderstood me, John. It wasn't Lukens who visited Mora, it was this Sam Donovan, the hero guy."

Jericho felt the blood begin to pound in his temples.

"Where is Mora now?" he asked. "Still at Weymouth?"

"His term was up a month ago," Demond said. "God knows where he is. You have to guess that Donovan, his friend, would know."

"Thanks, Seth," Jericho said, his voice cold.

"I thought you ought to know," Demond said, "but let the cops handle it, John. You can get in big trouble with Mora and his crowd."

"Sure, Seth," Jericho said, sounding suddenly far away.

The phone was ringing in Sam Donovan's one-room apartment on the lower East side when Donovan let himself in late that afternoon. It had been a good day for him. After the police had finished taking his statement there had been people waiting to buy him drinks, to hail him as a hero, to tell him what a great guy he was. Most of them were strangers, and most of them were prepared to buy as long as he could drink. He was in a sunlit fog when he stumbled across the room and reached for the phone.

"Donovan?" a cold male voice asked.

"Yeah."

"Mora wants to see you, on the double," the voice said.

"Where?"

"His place."

"I'm not supposed to go there," Donovan said.

"You better, if you care about a long life," the voice said. "You messed it up, you know." The phone went dead. The dial tone sounded.

In his personal and private fog Donovan tried to make sense out of the call. He had been told never to go to Mora's place, an old brownstone near the waterfront. It was essential that no one connect him with Mora.

But the voice on the phone had obviously known of the connection, which meant he must be one of Mora's people.

You didn't keep Mike Mora waiting.

His eyes not focusing quite normally, Sam Donovan looked up and down the street outside Mora's house. No one seemed to be paying any attention to him. He stumbled up the steps and rang the front-door bell. While he waited he wondered how he had "messed it up," as the voice on the telephone had told him. Was it possible, mid-day drunk, that he'd said something to someone that he shouldn't have said? He couldn't remember. He just couldn't remember.

The door opened and there was Mike Mora, dark, built like a wrestler, black eyes blazing with anger.

"What the hell are you doing here, Sam?" he demanded.

"You sent for me. I came," Donovan said.

"Like hell I sent for you!"

"The guy on the phone said I was to come on the double."

"You're drunk!"

"Yeah, but the guy on the phone was clear enough."

"What guy on what phone?" Mora reached out, grabbed Donovan by the front of his coat, and dragged him inside. "Get in here before somebody sees you," he said. He closed the front door, locked it, put the chain bolt in place. "Now tell me just what the hell you're talking about!"

"I tell you, Mike, this guy phoned, said I was to come here, you wanted to see me. I told him I wasn't supposed to come here. He said I'd better come if I was interested in a long life. He said I'd messed it up. How did I do that, Mike? I swear I don't know how I messed it up."

"You messed it up by taking orders from anyone but me to come here. Were you followed?"

"God, Mike, I don't think so."

There was a sound of shattering glass and splintering wood from behind them in what was a sparsely furnished living room. Mora spun around to see a giant of a man with red hair and a red beard and mustache jump down from the shattered window, brushing glass from the front of his coat.

"Oh, you were followed. You were definitely followed, Donovan," Jericho said. His eyes, cold as two newly minted dimes, were fixed on Mora who had murdered, or ordered to be murdered, scores of people in his time. "Keep your hands where I can see them, Mora, or I'll blow a hole in you big enough to drive a truck through."

There was no way Mora could know that what was pointing at him from Jericho's pocket was not a gun but the stem of an old briar

pipe. The gangster's right hand moved away from his coat lapel.

"Who the hell are you?" Mora asked.

"I'm Lyman Rockwell's closest friend," Jericho said.

"That's tough," Mora said, "but what's it got to do with me?"

"Don't bore me by playing the innocent," Jericho said. "You wanted Rockwell killed. You persuaded that psychotic kook, Lukens, to do the job for you. It was like buying him an ice-cream soda—he'd have done it for nothing, just for the pleasure of it. But you couldn't take the chance that he might boast about it, or spill the truth to someone. So you had your man Donovan there, standing right beside him. Lukens probably thought Donovan was there to help him get away. But Donovan was there to kill him."

"That's hogwash," Mora said. "You couldn't prove that pipedream in a hundred years."

"I'm not going to try to prove it," Jericho said. "I'm convinced of it myself. That's enough." The pipestem in Jericho's pocket jutted forward. "Now, Mora, take that gun out of your holster and toss it across the room. Very carefully! I can be so quick on the trigger you wouldn't believe it."

It probably crossed Mora's mind to risk a shootout. But he made the wrong decision. With a thumb and forefinger he extracted his gun from its holster and tossed it a few feet away. Donovan, watching like a bird fascinated by a snake, imagined he was involved in a drunken nightmare. He couldn't move. It made it easy for Jericho to turn and knock him flat with one jolting blow to the jaw.

"Now it's just between us, Mora," Jericho said.

"You're out of your skull!" Mora said.

"Maybe I am," Jericho said. "You see, buster, the doctors say Lyman may live, but only like a vegetable. That's how I'm going to leave you, Mora—a vegetable."

It was really no contest. Mike Mora knew fear for the first time in his life, and he fought like a frightened man. Jericho was an avenging angel, terrible in his anger. Even in the midst of his onslaught Jericho wondered if he finally meant to kill a man. What he really wanted was to inflict pain beyond Mora's capacity to endure it. The gangster was a bloodied ragdoll when someone, several someones, pulled Jericho away and held him.

"Keep him off me," Mora screamed. "I'll tell you anything if you'll keep him off me!"

The police, on information from Seth Demond, had arrived in time to prevent Jericho from completing something unthinkable. . .

Hours later Jericho found himself back at St. Vincent's Hospital. Laura Trask, like a cold statue, sat in the anteroom near the place where Lyman Rockwell was fighting for his now useless life. She seemed not to notice the bruises on Jericho's face.

She listened as he told her that the case was solved. For once the real murderer, the real power behind the gun, had been destroyed. It seemed to give her no pleasure to know that justice had been done. Nothing mattered to her except the outcome of the battle in the room nearby. Jericho even wondered if she'd heard what he told her.

Dr. Codman came out of the adjoining room, looking half dead himself.

"It's all over," he said, very quietly.

Laura stared at him, eyes wide.

"It's for the best, Miss Trask," the doctor said. "It's really for the best. No man should be asked to live the kind of life he faced."

Jericho took Laura in his arms to comfort her. One battle was over, but the war would go on.

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The lives of most people are dull, flat, dreary, pedestrian, stereotyped, uninspired. That was Charlie Hackman's problem . . .

A CRAVING FOR ORIGINALITY

by **BILL PRONZINI**

Charlie Hackman was a professional writer. He wrote popular fiction, any kind from sexless Westerns to sexy Gothics to oversexed historical romances, whatever the current trends happened to be. He could be counted on to deliver an acceptable manuscript to order in two weeks. He had published 9,000,000 words in a fifteen-year career, under a variety of different names (Allison St. Cyr being the most prominent), and he couldn't tell you the plot of any book he'd written more than six months ago. He was what is euphemistically known in the trade as "a dependable wordsmith," or "a versatile pro," or "a steady producer of commercial commodities."

In other words, he was well-named: Hackman was a hack.

The reason he was a hack was not because he was fast and prolific, or because he contrived popular fiction on demand, or because he wrote for money. It was because he was and did all these things with no ambition and no sense of commitment. It was because he wrote without originality of any kind.

Of course, Hackman had not started out to be a hack; no writer does. But he had discovered early on, after his first two novels were rejected with printed slips by 37 publishers each, that (a) he was not very good, and (b) what talent he did possess was in the form of imitations. When he tried to do imaginative, ironic, meaningful work of his own he failed miserably; but when he imitated the ideas

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and visions of others, the blurred carbon copies he produced were just literate enough to be publishable.

Truth to tell, this didn't bother him very much. The one thing he had always wanted to be was a professional writer; he had dreamed of nothing else since his discovery of the Hardy Boys and Tarzan books in his pre-teens. So from the time of his first sale he accepted what he was, shrugged, and told himself not to worry about it. What was wrong with being a hack, anyway? The writing business was full of them—and hacks, no less than nonhacks, offered a desirable form of escapist entertainment to the masses; the only difference was, his readership had nondiscriminating tastes. Was his product, after all, any less honorable than what television offered? Was he hurting anybody, corrupting anybody? No. Absolutely not. So what was wrong with being a hack?

For one and a half decades, operating under this cheerful set of rationalizations, Hackman was a complacent man. He wrote from ten to fifteen novels per year, all for minor and exploitative paperback houses, and earned an average annual sum of \$25,000. He married an ungraceful woman named Grace and moved into a suburban house on Long Island. He went bowling once a week, played poker once a week, argued conjugal matters with his wife once a week, and took the train into Manhattan to see his agent and editors once a week. Every June he and Grace spent 14 pleasant days at Lake George in the Adirondacks. Every Christmas Grace's mother came from Pennsylvania and spent 14 miserable days with them.

He drank a little too much sometimes and worried about lung cancer because he smoked three packs of cigarettes a day. He cheated moderately on his income tax. He coveted one of his neighbors' wives. He read all the current paperback bestsellers, dissected them in his mind, and then reassembled them into similar plots for his own novels. When new acquaintances asked him what he did for a living he said, "I'm a writer," and seldom failed to feel a small glow of pride.

That was the way it was for 15 years—right up until the morning of his fortieth birthday.

Hackman woke up on that morning, looked at Grace lying beside him, and realized she had put on at least 40 pounds since their marriage. He listened to himself wheeze as he lighted his first cigarette of the day. He got dressed and walked downstairs to his office, where he read the half page of manuscript still in his typewriter (an occult pirate novel, the latest craze). He went outside and stood

on the lawn and looked at his house. Then he sat down on the porch steps and looked at himself.

I'm not just a writer of hack stories, he thought sadly, I'm a liver of a hack life.

Fifteen years of cohabiting with trite fictional characters in hackneyed fictional situations. Fifteen years of cohabiting with an unimaginative wife in a trite suburb in a hackneyed lifestyle in a conventional world. Hackman the hack, doing the same things over and over again; Hackman the hack, grinding out books and days one by one. No uniqueness in any of it, from the typewriter to the bedroom to the Adirondacks.

No originality.

He sat there for a long while, thinking about this. No originality. Funny. It was like waking up to the fact that, after 40 years, you've never tasted pineapple, that pineapple was missing from your life. All of a sudden you craved pineapple; you wanted it more than you'd ever wanted anything before. Pineapple or originality—it was the same principle.

Grace came out eventually and asked him what he was doing. "Thinking that I crave originality," he said, and she said, "Will you settle for eggs and bacon?" Trite dialogue, Hackman thought. Hackneyed humor. He told her he didn't want any breakfast and went into his office.

Originality. Well, even a hack ought to be able to create something fresh and imaginative if he applied himself; even a hack learned a few tricks in 15 years. How about a short story? Good. He had never written a short story; he would be working in new territory already. Now how about a plot?

He sat at his typewriter. He paced the office. He lay down on the couch. He sat at the typewriter again. Finally the germ of an idea came to him and he nurtured it until it began to develop. Then he began to type.

It took him all day to write the story, which was about 5000 words long. That was about his average wordage per day on a novel, but on a novel he never revised so much as a comma. After supper he went back into the office and made pen-and-ink corrections until eleven o'clock. Then he went to bed, declined Grace's reluctant offer of "a birthday present," and dreamed about the story until six A.M. At which time he got up, retyped the pages, made some more revisions in ink, and retyped the story a third time before he was satisfied. He mailed it that night to his agent.

Three days later the agent called about a new book contract. Hackman asked him, "Did you have a chance to read the short story I sent you?"

"I read it, all right. And sent it straight back to you."

"Sent it back? What's wrong with it?"

"It's old hat," the agent said. "The idea's been done to death."

Hackman went out into the back yard and lay down in the hammock. All right, so maybe he was doomed to hackdom as a writer; maybe he just wasn't capable of *writing* anything original. But that didn't mean he couldn't *do* something original, did it? He had a quick mind, a good grasp of what was going on in the world. He ought to be able to come up with at least one original idea, maybe even an idea that would not only satisfy his craving for originality but change his life, get him out of the stale rut he was in.

He closed his eyes.

He concentrated.

He thought about jogging backward from Long Island to Miami Beach and then applying for an entry in the Guinness Book of World Records.

Imitative.

He thought about marching naked through Times Square at high noon, waving a standard paperback contract and using a bullhorn to protest man's literary inhumanity to man.

Trite.

He thought about adopting a red-white-and-blue disguise and robbing a bank in each one of the original thirteen states.

Derivative.

He thought about changing his name to Holmes, finding a partner named Watson, and opening a private inquiry agency that specialized in solving the unsolved and insoluble.

Parrotry.

He thought about doing other things legal and illegal, clever and foolish, dangerous and harmless.

Unoriginal. Unoriginal. Unoriginal.

That day passed and several more just like it. Hackman became obsessed with originality—so much so that he found himself unable to write, the first serious block he had had as a professional. It was maddening, but every time he thought of a sentence and started to type it out, something would click in his mind and make him analyze it as original or banal. The verdict was always banal.

He thought about buying a small printing press, manufacturing

bogus German Deutsche marks in his basement, and then flying to Munich and passing them at the Oktoberfest.

Counterfeit.

Hackman took to drinking a good deal more than his usual allotment of alcohol in the evenings. His consumption of cigarettes rose to four packs a day and was climbing. His originality quotient remained at zero.

He thought about having a treasure map tattooed on his chest, claiming to be the sole survivor of a gang of armored car thieves, and conning all sorts of greedy people out of their life savings.

Trite.

The passing days turned into passing weeks. Hackman still wasn't able to write; he wasn't able to do much of anything except vainly overwork his brain cells. He knew he couldn't function again as a writer or a human being until he did something, *anything* original.

He thought about building a distillery in his garage and becoming Long Island's largest manufacturer and distributor of bootleg whiskey.

Hackneyed.

Grace had begun a daily and voluble series of complaints. Why was he moping around, drinking and smoking so much? Why didn't he go into his office and write his latest piece of trash? What were they going to do for money if he didn't fulfill his contracts? How would they pay the mortgage and the rest of their bills? What was the *matter* with him, anyway? Was he going through some kind of midlife crisis or what?

Hackman thought about strangling her, burying her body under the acacia tree in the back yard—committing the perfect crime.

Stale. Bewhiskered.

Another week disappeared. Hackman was six weeks overdue now on an occult pirate novel and two weeks overdue on a male-action novel; his publishers were upset, his agent was upset; where the hell were the manuscripts? Hackman said he was just polishing up the first one. "Sure you are," the agent said over the phone. "Well, you'd better have it with you when you come in on Friday. I mean that, Charlie. You'd better deliver."

Hackman thought about kidnapping the star of Broadway's top musical extravaganza and holding her for a ransom of \$1,000,000 plus a role in her next production.

Old stuff.

He decided that things couldn't go on this way. Unless he came

up with an original idea pretty soon, he might just as well shuffle off this mortal coil.

He thought about buying some rat poison and mixing himself an arsenic cocktail.

More old stuff.

Or climbing a utility pole and grabbing hold of a high-tension wire.

Prosaic. Corny.

Or hiring a private plane to fly him over the New Jersey swamps and then jumping out at 2000 feet.

Ho-hum.

Damn! He couldn't seem to go on, he couldn't seem *not* to go on. So what was he going to do?

He thought about driving over to Pennsylvania, planting certain carefully faked documents inside Grace's mother's house, and turning the old bat in to the F.B.I. as a foreign spy.

Commonplace.

On Friday morning he took his cigarettes (the second of the five packs a day he was now consuming) and his latest hangover down to the train station. There he boarded the express for Manhattan and took a seat in the club car.

He thought about hijacking the train and extorting \$20,000,000 from the state of New York.

Imitative.

When the train arrived at Penn Station he trudged the six blocks to his agent's office. In the elevator on the way up an attractive young blonde gave him a friendly smile and said it was a nice day, wasn't it?

Hackman thought about making her his mistress, having a torrid affair, and then running off to Acapulco with her and living in sin in a villa high above the harbor and weaving Mexican *serapes* by day and drinking tequila by night.

Hackneyed.

The first thing his agent said to him was, "Where's the manuscript, Charlie?" Hackman said it wasn't ready yet, he was having a few personal problems. The agent said, "You think you got problems? What about *my* problems? You think I can afford to have hack writers missing deadlines and making editors unhappy? That kind of stuff reflects back on me, ruins my reputation. I'm not in this business for my health, so maybe you'd better just find yourself another agent."

Hackman thought about bashing him over the head with a paperweight, disposing of the body, and assuming his identity after first gaining 60 pounds and going through extensive plastic surgery.

Motheaten. Threadbare.

Out on the street again, he decided he needed a drink and turned into the first bar he came to. He ordered a triple vodka and sat brooding over it. I've come to the end of my rope, he thought. If there's one original idea in this world, I can't even imagine what it is. For that matter, I can't even imagine a partly original idea, which I'd settle for right now because maybe there *isn't* anything completely original any more.

"What am I going to do?" he asked the bartender.

"Who cares?" the bartender said. "Stay, go, drink, don't drink—it's all the same to me."

Hackman sighed and got off his stool and swayed out onto East 52nd Street. He turned west and began to walk back toward Grand Central, jostling his way through the mid-afternoon crowds. Overhead, the sun glared down at him between the buildings like a malevolent eye.

He was nearing Madison Avenue, muttering clichés to himself, when the idea struck him.

It came out of nowhere, full-born in an instant, the way most great ideas (or so he had heard) always do. He came to an abrupt standstill. Then he began to smile. Then he began to laugh. Passersby gave him odd looks and detoured around him, but Hackman didn't care. The idea was all that mattered.

It was inspired.

It was imaginative.

It was meaningful.

It was original.

Oh, not one-hundred-percent original—but that was all right. He had already decided that finding total originality was an impossible goal. This idea was close, though. It was close and it was wonderful and he was going to do it. Of course he was going to do it; after all these weeks of search and frustration, how could he *not* do it?

Hackman set out walking again. His stride was almost jaunty and he was whistling to himself. Two blocks south he entered a sporting goods store and found what he wanted. The salesman who waited on him asked if he was going camping. "Nope," Hackman said, and winked. "Something *much* more original than that."

He left the store and hurried down to Madison to a bookshop that

specialized in mass-market paperbacks. Inside were several long rows of shelving, each shelf containing different categories of fiction and nonfiction, alphabetically arranged. Hackman stepped into the fiction section, stopped in front of the shelf marked "Historical Romances," and squinted at the titles until he located one of his own pseudonymous works. Then he unwrapped his parcel.

And took out the woodsman's hatchet.

And got a comfortable grip on its handle.

And raised it high over his head.

And—

Whack! Eleven copies of *Love's Tender Fury* by Allison St. Cyr were drawn and quartered.

A male customer yelped; a female customer shrieked. Hackman took no notice. He moved on to the shelf marked "Occult Pirate Adventure," raised the hatchet again, and—

Whack! Nine copies of *The Devil Daughter of Jean Lafitte* by Adam Caine were exorcised and scuttled.

On to "Adult Westerns." And—

Whack! Four copies of *Ryder Rides the Outlaw Trail* by Galen McGee bit the dust.

Behind the front counter a chubby little man was jumping up and down, waving his arms. "What are you doing?" he kept shouting at Hackman. "What are you doing?"

"Hackwork!" Hackman shouted back. "I'm a hack writer doing hackwork!"

He stepped smartly to "Gothic Suspense." And—

Whack! Five copies of *Mansion of Dread* by Melissa Ann Farnsworth were reduced to rubble.

On to "Male Action Series," and—

Whack! Ten copies of Max Ruffe's *The Grenade Launcher #23: Blowup at City Hall* exploded into fragments.

Hackman paused to survey the carnage. Then he nodded in satisfaction and turned toward the front door. The bookshop was empty now, but the chubby little man was visible on the sidewalk outside, jumping up and down and semaphoring his arms amid a gathering crowd. Hackman crossed to the door in purposeful strides and threw it open.

People scattered every which way when they saw him come out with the hatchet aloft. But they needn't have feared; he had no interest in people, except as bit players in this little drama. After all, what hack worth the name ever cared a hoot about his audience?

He began to run up 48th Street toward Fifth Avenue, brandishing the hatchet. Nobody tried to stop him, not even when he lopped off the umbrella shading a frankfurter vendor's cart.

"I'm a hack!" he shouted.

And shattered the display window of an exclusive boutique.

"I'm Hackman the hack!" he yelled.

And halved the product and profits of a pretzel vendor.

"I'm Hackman the hack and I'm hacking my way to glory!" he bellowed.

And sliced the antenna off an illegally parked Cadillac limousine.

He was almost to Fifth Avenue by this time. Ahead of him he could see a red signal light holding up crosstown traffic; this block of 48th Street was momentarily empty. Behind him he could hear angry shouts and what sounded like a police whistle. He looked back over his shoulder. Several people were giving pursuit, including the chubby little man from the bookshop; the leader of the pack, a blue uniform with a red face atop it, was less than 50 yards distant.

But the game was not up yet, Hackman thought. There were more bookstores along Fifth; with any luck he could hack his way through two or three before they got him. He decided south was the direction he wanted to go, pulled his head around, and started to sprint across the empty expanse of 48th.

Only the street wasn't empty any longer; the signal on Fifth had changed to green for the eastbound traffic.

He ran right out in front of an oncoming car.

He saw it too late to jump clear, and the driver saw him too late to brake or swerve. But before he and the machine joined forces, Hackman had just enough time to realize the full scope of what was happening—and to feel a sudden elation. In fact, he wished with his last wish that he'd thought of this himself. It was the crowning touch, the final fillip, the *coup de grâce*; it lent the death of Hackman, unlike the life of Hackman, a genuine originality.

Because the car which did him in was not just a car; it was a New York City taxi cab.

Otherwise known as a hack.

"Q"

a **NEW Sam Ohara detective story** by

NAN HAMILTON

Lieutenant Sam Ohara, a six-foot Japanese-American, made his bow in the September 1978 issue of EQMM. As in his first case, Ohara draws on his Japanese heritage to solve the mystery of the kidnaped tree—a prize bonzai, a hundred-year-old treasure that was more than a tree to its owner, Makoto Koyama. To him and his family the rare tree, so lovingly nurtured from a small seed, held in its heart the heart of Japan and the memory of home . . .

THE MELTED-SUGAR GLAZE

by NAN HAMILTON

Stanley Kowata lay on his bed fully dressed, watching day's first light probing through the threadbare windowshade. He had put the note beside the milk bottles just before midnight. They'd find it this morning. He wanted to giggle at the pleasure of it. Today he was going to score big. The Koyamas were finally going to pay for firing him, even if they didn't know it.

He got up and put on his glasses. It would be easy to do it this early with nobody around. When he got the money he'd split. No more "Stanley, where you been? Stanley, mow the lawn . . . Stanley . . . Stanley." He hated the name his mother had given him. Well, today would see the end of it. Kaz Kowata had it made.

He eased himself out the front door, closing it softly behind him. The street was deserted. Humming to himself, he walked the short distance to the red brick buildings of the Community Center. He was safe—who would question the janitor coming in early on the day of the festival.

He unlocked the gymnasium which housed the exhibit of bonsai and flower arrangements. Pent-up floral scents filled his nose. There

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was just enough light to enable him to make his way without disaster among the flower-laden tables. Then he saw Koyama's prize bonsai, standing alone on a small raised platform.

He had never been allowed to touch it when he'd worked at Koyama's nursery. When he picked it up, he almost fell under the weight, and cursed as he shifted his skinny arms for a better hold. A strand of his overlong hair caught in the branches. It was almost as if the tree was fighting to protect itself. Impatiently he jerked his hair free, and bent almost double he staggered to the door.

Once outside he needed every ounce of his strength to make the short distance to his back yard, where the old-fashioned iron incinerator stood. Down the block a man stopped to watch, then silently followed him into the back yard.

When Stanley set the tree down to remove the small pile of firewood that made a cover for his planned hiding place, he failed to notice the man behind him. A snarl and a faint acrid odor were all that warned him before the mountain fell on him. His head was slammed onto the concrete driveway and he was aware of nothing more . . .

When consciousness returned, he had a relentless, stabbing pain in his head. Though his eyes were open, he couldn't seem to see. He took off his glasses and found that the lenses were cross-hatched with fragmented splinters. He was alone, but the invaluable bonsai was gone!

As his rage cleared, he began to think. Whoever had taken the tree wouldn't return it to the Community Center. He was still in business! And he had the best alibi he could get! Now he could play the injured victim, assaulted and robbed of his keys. Quickly he fumbled the keys from his pocket and threw them into the bushes.

Painfully he dragged himself around to the front porch; his cries of anguish were real enough. His mother rushed out in her kimono, crying out as she saw his scratched and bleeding face. Between groans he got out his story. He refused to go to the hospital, but he made no objection when she called the police.

Desk Sergeant Reagan couldn't believe the call from Mrs. Koyama. "In all my years on the force, Ma'am, no one has ever kidnaped a *tree*." He kept his voice even, calming the excited caller. "For one thing, they're very hard to move."

The agitated woman fought for English words to convey her meaning. Then he understood. A quick look at the board told him Charley

Four had just cleared an assault complaint nearby. "I'll have a car there shortly, Ma'am," he promised.

He then called Charley Four to see the woman about a stolen tree, and gave the address of the Japanese Community Center in Pa-coima. He grinned as the receiver squawked disbelief. When Charley Four reported back, he'd know if it was a case for the "Irishman."

Half an hour later Charley Four relayed that the tree actually had been kidnaped, since there was already a ransom note. They were having some trouble communicating with the people concerned.

Reagan called Robbery-Homicide, got Sam Ohara, and explained the situation.

"All right," Ohara said. "I'll go right over."

"I'll tell McCarthy. He's new on Charley Four. He'll be glad to have an Ohara on the team."

Sam Ohara smiled at Reagan's house joke. Too bad the sergeant wouldn't be there to see McCarthy's face when the "Irishman"—Ohara—turned out to be a six-foot Japanese-American, without an apostrophe in his name.

Ohara had been at the Community Center the previous night with his family, for the Obon Festival. They went every year. It had been the same as always—food and game booths, the Ondo dance, displays of dolls and crafts, and the flower and bonsai exhibit. Up to now there had never been so much as an incident. The publicity this year had centered on Makoto Koyama's rare one-hundred-year-old bonsai. It had never before been publicly displayed.

It was a short drive to the Center's red brick buildings he knew so well. He'd learned his judo here, joined the Boy Scouts, played basketball. He walked past the gay carnival booths that filled the parking area and came to the open door of the gymnasium. For a few moments he stood there, studying the scene. The night before the room had been filled with people admiring the flowers and the unique beauty of the bonsai. They'd gazed in awe before the miracle of the miniature trees, which could distill the essence of mountain and forest into the compass of a man's hand—trees that followed nature's seasons in a small pot of earth, many years away from their first sprouting.

The small platform where just last night the fabulous old White Pine had been on display now stood empty. Two patrol officers were interviewing an elderly Japanese couple. One of the officers came toward him.

"Excuse me, sir, but unless you have something to report, please remain outside."

Ohara's eyes flicked above the man's badge to his name—Ball. Then he produced his ID.

Only ironclad Academy discipline kept the young officer's cool intact. Carefully controlling his expression he called his partner.

"Mac, this is Ohara from detectives." The "Ohara" came out as if it had been underlined.

The double-take look on McCarthy's face would have made Reagan's day. The elderly Japanese man hurried up, followed by his wife. They bowed, a courtesy which Ohara returned with practised ease. Eagerly they poured out a flood of staccato Japanese.

In the first available pause Officer Ball spoke up. "It seems the tree was kidnaped. That's the ransom note the woman is holding. She keeps saying she'll show it only to the head man."

"For the moment that's me, I guess." Ohara eased the statement with a smile. "Who made the discovery?"

McCarthy, his gaze carefully on his report answered, "Mrs. Koyama found the note when she took in her morning milk. She and her husband rushed to the Center. The door of the gymnasium was unlocked. They went in and found their tree gone."

Ohara turned to the old lady. "*Okusan*, may I see the note, please?"

At a nod from her husband she handed Ohara a piece of brown paper. He took it carefully by the edge. It was plain, grocery-bag paper, folded over several times. He spread it out and read:

"Pay five thousand dollars or your tree gets burned. Small bills in a paper bag. At 5 P.M. tonight walk around the Festival for ten minutes. Stop at Doughball booth. Put bag on ground. Don't look around. *Don't call police*. Do it right and you get word where to find your tree."

Obviously the writer knew Koyama. He also knew the festival booths.

"There's something else," McCarthy added. "We took an earlier assault call about a block away. The victim was a young man named Stanley Kowata. He's the janitor for the Center here. The mugger roughed him up. Took his keys and small change."

"I'll want to talk to him," Ohara said. "Is he in the hospital?"

"No, he refused to go. Here's his address."

"Thanks," Ohara said. "I'll take it from here."

Ohara turned back to the Koyamas. He asked who, besides themselves, tended the White Pine.

"Only my wife and I ever take care," Koyama answered. "My helper just lift sometimes. White Pine is heavy."

"What's your helper's name?"

"Roy Tatsugi, but"—Koyama gestured toward the note—"he cannot read or write. He is one of Buddha's sad little ones. His body is grown a man, but his mind remains a muddled pool. Please do not frighten him, Ohara-san."

"Don't worry, Sensei. I will be gentle. Where can I see him?"

"He come to Festival today."

Ohara nodded. "Good. I'll see him there. I think that's all for now."

"Pardon, Ohara-san, not all. I will pay money to save my White Pine. That way—no danger."

"I understand, Sensei," Ohara soothed. "But five thousand dollars is a lot of money."

A brief gesture of Koyama's roughened hands dismissed the money. "True. But White Pine worth more than money. You know story of tree?"

"Please, Sensei, tell me."

Koyama began: "My ancestors come from Sankei Province where are many bonsai masters. My grandfather was most famous master. His son, my father, when very young man want to come here to America. Day he left, grandfather give him small seed and say, 'This seed from our white mountain pine. Take with you to new land. Plant and care for it as I have shown you. One day bonsai from this seed hold heart of Japan and memory of home.'

"One hundred years ago, when reach America, my father plant seed, make bonsai. When very old man, he give to me. I have taken care all my years. Now I am old. I would give to my son, but he is dead in war. Is not just tree. Is family. So, Ohara-san, I will pay."

Ohara had never thought of himself as anything other than American but all that was Japanese in him responded to what Koyama had said. He looked at the small wiry figure before him and felt a kinship with the pain he saw in the weathered face, and with Koyama's patient dignity.

"I will not prevent you doing what you feel is best, Koyama-san. Do as the note says. There will be no police in evidence."

Koyama's bent shoulders straightened. "Thank you. I must now see my friend, Hiroshi. He is bank official. He will help with the money. He turned to his wife. "Miki, please go to Nursery. Be sure Roy spray new plants today." With formal courtesy the old couple bowed and left.

Ohara was just leaving the gymnasium when he saw an old friend coming toward him. It was Dr. Harry Ito, president of the Community Center, and a well-known psychiatrist.

"Glad to see you, Harry," Ohara greeted him.

"It's fortunate you're on the case, Sam. This is a bad thing for Koyama, and for the Center. I'll do anything I can to help." The doctor's eyes behind his gold-rimmed spectacles were grave.

"Thanks, Harry. If you have a minute to spare, I need some background." He indicated a bench in the small Japanese garden dedicated to the Center's war dead. "Let's sit down."

A bronze plaque of names, framed by dark pine branches, gleamed above a small stone pool. Involuntarily Ohara's eyes sought the name Koyama and found it. "Keizo Koyama, d. Italy, 1943."

"How well do you know Koyama?" Ohara asked.

"I've known him for years," Dr. Ito answered in his slow, deep voice, "but not intimately. He's one of the old-timers, not too active in the Center."

"Is he well liked? Any jealousy over the exhibit?"

"Oh, no. He was asked by the Association to show his rare bonsai. Some of our people felt it would be an attraction. They believe it's time the public knew more about what the Issei and Nisei have accomplished here." His brief glance around the Center buildings was eloquent.

"What do you know about his helper, Roy Tatsugi?"

Dr. Ito smiled. "He's a patient of mine. He was in an institution for the retarded run by the state. He's been mentally deficient from birth. When he was small both his parents died in a fire. There were no relations, so he ended up in the institution. I felt he could be helped more in a different environment, so I had him released in my custody for a trial period."

"Another of your lame ducks?" Ohara knew this type of rescue was a passion with his friend.

Dr. Ito shrugged. "Koyama agreed to give him a job in his nursery. It's worked out well. Roy's even joined the beginning judo class. That's a real step out of his shell."

"Where does he live, Harry?"

Dr. Ito was instantly protective. "Sam, he could have nothing to do with this. I hate to think what might happen if the police start to question him. He's terrified of anyone official. He thinks they're going to send him back to the institution."

"Relax, Harry. Koyama said Roy would be here this afternoon—"

"Yes, he's the drummer for the Ondo dance," Dr. Ito interrupted. "If you could talk to him then, very casually, it should be all right."

"I'll do that," Ohara agreed. "But I still want to know where he lives."

Harry Ito wrote on a card and handed it to Ohara. "He lives above a pawnshop a few blocks away. The owner's a friend. He's glad to have someone on the premises at night. He gives Roy his food and keeps an eye on him."

"Now, where can I find Stanley Kowata?"

Harry pointed across the parking lot. "That street just opposite. It's the fourth house from the corner."

"Can you tell me anything about him?"

"Not much. He's a school dropout. Koyama tried him for a while, then let him go. His mother asked me to find him a job, so I took him on here as janitor."

After parting from Harry Ito, Ohara walked over to the Kowata house. It was an old gray frame, almost painful in its neat respectability. Its tiny lawn was bordered with pink geraniums, their bright color an unspoken defiance of the drabness of the house.

When he was finally admitted by a reluctant Mrs. Kowata, Ohara found Stanley willing to be cooperative despite his swollen jaw and other obvious discomforts.

"He's so brave," Mrs. Kowata beamed. "He wouldn't even go to the hospital."

The interview was brief. No, Stanley had not seen his assailant. He had no enemies.

"Where did the attack take place?"

"On the sidewalk in front of the house, like I told the other cops. I heard this sort of growl. I smelled him, then he was on me."

"What kind of smell? Alcohol?"

"No, more like roach killer." Impatiently Stanley held up his glasses. "He broke my glasses and stole my keys."

"The keys were probably what he was after," Ohara commented. "Someone got into the Center this morning and stole Koyama Sensei's rare bonsai." The statement provoked an unexpected reaction from Stanley.

"Big deal!" he sneered. "I've been beaten and robbed! Serves the old man right. I ran my legs off working in his nursery and when I asked for a little more money he fired me."

Ohara cut short Stanley's diatribe by leaving. When the front door closed behind him, he walked down the porch steps studying

the area of the attack. There was no sign of scuffle. The prim geraniums had not lost so much as a petal. It must have happened somewhere else. Why would Stanley lie about it? He walked the length of the flowery border to the farthest edge where it curved toward the back, thinking about Stanley.

With access to the Center's keys he was a prime suspect, except that he had been attacked, and the keys stolen. It was a perfect alibi. His injuries were real enough. At his feet Ohara saw two pink geraniums crushed into the ground, the first sign of the attack. Following the path around the side of the house, he came to a large old-fashioned incinerator. The dirt around it had been scattered and scuffed. Two small objects caught his eye—a triangular piece of glass and a small chip of pottery.

Ohara took a plastic evidence bag from his pocket and slipped the tiny objects inside. As he looked at the huge old incinerator, an excitement built in him. Was it large enough to hide a bonsai? He began lifting out the small pieces of firewood that jammed the top. There were not many. But the cavernous iron stomach was empty.

Disappointed, Ohara began to replace the wood. He had just finished when sounds from the Kowata front porch alerted him. He slipped out the back gate into the alley and followed it until he came to the street facing the Center.

The smell of noodles and teriyaki being prepared in one of the booths was irresistible. He stopped for a quick lunch, then drove back to the station.

Sitting at his desk, he thought about the crime. It took knowledge and opportunity. Stanley Kowata had both. The money was motive enough, even without the obvious hatred for Koyama that Ohara had seen in Stanley's face. But he needed something more. Deliberately he cleared his mind to let scenes from the previous night's festival flow through.

His first strong impression was of the Ondo dancing—traditional music, kimono-clad dancers circling the drum platform. The drummer, a heavy-faced youth in thick glasses, had flailed at the drum with childish glee. The name, Roy Tatsugi, now had a face. Ohara's mind switched to the exhibit hall, trying to bring the spectators into focus. Many he knew, but many more were strangers and non-Japanese—a haystack of suspects.

He lingered longest on the magnificent White Pine in its blue pottery bowl. Something halted his smooth flow of thought—the deep blue glaze of the bonsai bowl. He reached into his pocket and took

out the evidence bag. He laid the tiny chip on his desk, the triangular piece of glass beside it.

The chip was very small, but it glowed with the same melted-sugar glaze as Koyama's bonsai bowl, rich with the soft patina of age. It could be part of the story, but it was not enough.

They would have to play out the charade as Koyama wanted. If it went as he suspected, they could take the thief that afternoon, neatly tied up in red-handed evidence. Still, it would not give him the answer he wanted most—where was the White Pine?

When his partner, Jake Wozinski, came in from lunch, Ohara outlined the case and laid out his plans. "I want you visible, Jake. Wear your loudest Hawaiian shirt."

Jake was famous for his assortment of these exotic garments. He grinned appreciatively. "No problem."

Ohara glanced at his watch. "I'll have to get back there, now. See you at five."

When he arrived the parking lot was crowded. The dancers, pretty girls, and toddlers in bright red kimonos, like animated dolls, were a prime attraction. The PA system was playing *Tanko Bushi*, the Miner's Dance, but the exuberant spirit of the previous night was missing. Puzzled at first, Ohara soon realized why. Roy, the happy-hearted drummer, was missing.

Uneasy, he walked back to his car and called for a patrol unit to go to the pawnshop and pick the boy up. "No hurry," he said, "just get him over here." That done, he returned to the parking lot and slipped into the back of the Doughball booth. An orange and green Hawaiian shirt advertised Jake's presence nearby.

At precisely five Ohara watched Koyama start his walk around the circle, a brown paper bag in his hand. When he came to a stop in front of the Doughball booth, Jake was standing beside him. After a moment the old man stooped briefly, straightened, then moved away.

The crowd filled the vacant space, but no one bent to pick up the paper bag. Then Ohara saw Jake's sudden move. In seconds Ohara was out of the booth and following. He could barely glimpse the head of a small boy. Then, unexpectedly, the youngster shouted, "Koyama-san, Koyama-san, you dropped your lunch!"

Jake stopped so suddenly that he almost fell over the child, who was waving the brown bag in the air. Koyama looked back tensely just as a man's arm in a checkered shirt sleeve reached out to snatch the bag from the child's hand.

Checkered Shirt broke from the crowd and raced for a clear space between the buildings. Jake, his big body moving with surprising speed, followed. By the time Ohara had pushed free of the milling crowd, Checkered Shirt had almost reached the free run of the alley. Then Jake launched his two-hundred-plus pounds of ex-linebacker in a flying tackle. The two men crashed to the ground together. Ohara had almost reached their struggling bodies when he saw a skinny arm pull loose from under Jake, a knife glittering.

In a desperate panting effort Ohara threw himself forward and succeeded in grabbing the bony wrist in a vise-like Aikido hold. He twisted and pressed backward with his thumb. The knife fell harmlessly to the ground. It was all over. Anguished groans were the only protest left in Jake's captive. As he was pulled to his feet, Stanley Kowata's quick mind was already estimating the advantages in a claim of "police brutality." Ohara cuffed him as Jake picked up the knife and the brown paper bag.

"Thanks, partner. I owe you." Jake's blue eyes were warm with gratitude.

"Do itashimashite." Ohara looked over at his long-time friend. The formal Japanese "You're welcome" said it all.

"Ohara-san." It was Koyama, his face drawn with anxiety.

"We'll have to keep the bag and its contents for evidence, Sensei," Ohara said. "I'll give you a receipt."

The old man might not have heard. "My White Pine—what happen now?"

Stanley snorted. Koyama turned toward him. "Stanley, you take my tree? Please, you give back."

"What you trying to lay on me, old man? All I did was grab the kid's lunch bag. It was all a gag."

"Is this a gag, too?" Ohara held the blue glazed chip out.

Stanley stared down at it, his face a careful blank. Koyama touched the iridescent flake of pottery with his finger. "Is from bowl of White Pine. Where you find, Ohara-san?"

"In Stanley's back yard," Ohara said and waited, his eyes probing the boy's face. He did not miss the quickly suppressed flash of alarm that betrayed him.

But Stanley played it safe and dumb. "What you smoking, man? I don't have his tree." Then he laughed with a bravado that seemed worn thin.

Ohara turned to Jake. "Give him his rights and take him to the station."

Then he drew Koyama a little way down the alley. "I know Stanley worked for you, Sensei. Why did you fire him?"

"Money gone from register. No see happen, but Stanley only one there. I think he steal my tree, too. He lie."

Ohara nodded. "Yes. But he hasn't got it now. He's not lying about that." Briefly he told Koyama what had happened.

The old man slumped in despair. Ohara put an arm around his thin shoulders, searching for words of comfort. Then, through his physical senses, Ohara saw the truth.

He heard his name called urgently and turned. Harry Ito was coming toward them. "Sam, there's an important call for you in the office."

Leaving a bewildered Koyama staring after him, Ohara followed Dr. Ito to the office. His body tensed as he listened to the message. "I'm on my way," he said. He hung up abruptly and took Dr. Ito by the arm. "Come on, Harry, I need you."

The call had been a disastrous confirmation of the obvious truth he'd discovered as he stood beside Koyama. The faint acrid odor of the old man's work clothes had teased his nostrils and his memory. It had also identified Stanley's attacker.

He didn't like what he had to tell Harry Ito. As he spurted his car from the curb he said baldly, "Harry, I've pulled a bad one. That call was about Roy Tatsugi. When he didn't turn up this afternoon, I sent a police car to pick him up. As you predicted, he panicked. He's locked himself in his room and is firing wild shots at anyone who comes near. Where could he have gotten a gun?"

"Tom keeps one in the back of the pawnshop." To Ohara, the look on Dr. Ito's face was a silent reproach.

When they drew up before the pawnshop, three Black-and-Whites and the ominous bulk of a SWAT vehicle lined the street. A black-clad officer held a bullhorn as he waited for the tear-gas gun to be loaded. Ohara rushed out of his car and ran up to him, his ID ready.

"I'm Ohara. What's the situation?"

"He won't come out. He's still firing. It's only a matter of time before he hits someone."

Ohara held the officer's reluctant gaze. "The boy's not a psycho. He's Dr. Ito's patient, a retarded kid who thought the police had come to take him back to the institution."

"That's where he belongs, I'd say."

Ohara kept his temper. "Look, I think I can talk him out. I'd like to try."

The SWAT commander looked dubious. "Well, you can try, but I've seen this kind before. I don't think it'll work. God knows I don't want to take him our way unless I have to."

Ohara wasted no time. "Harry, what does Roy respect? Give me something he likes—food—anything!"

Dr. Ito's response was quick and to the point. "His whole life now is the Martial Arts—Judo, Aikido, Karate. He reveres the Senseis. As for food, I know he likes noodles. That help?"

Ohara nodded. "It gives me an idea that may work." He went over to the trunk of his car and pulled out a black bundle of cloth. Stripping off his coat and tie, he unfolded the bundle and tied what appeared to be a long divided skirt around his waist. The officer watched him, puzzled.

"What's that?"

"It's a *hakima*, the traditional dress of an Aikido Sensei. Dr. Ito tells me Roy respects all the Martial Arts Senseis. Maybe with this I can make him listen to reason." He pulled off his shoes and socks and was ready.

Slowly Ohara walked forward, a tall straight figure in black and white.

"Roy Tatsugi!" he called out, the ring of command in his voice. "I am a Sensei, and wish to see you. You will show proper respect."

By that time he had reached the side entrance. The waiting police held their places as Ohara disappeared up the stairs. At the top, facing the locked door, Ohara estimated the probable speed of Roy's reactions, then delivered a hard-heeled karate kick to the flimsy door. It sprang back on its hinges. Roy turned from the window, the gun wavering in his hand.

"*Rei!*" Ohara said sternly. He hoped Roy would respond to the Sensei command to bow—universal tradition in the Martial Arts. Indecision etched itself like pain on the boy's heavy round face. His eventual response was to thrust the gun forward in angry menace.

Ohara balanced time and distance. He knew he could not kick the gun away before it blasted him, so he held Roy's eyes with his own for a dead-still second. Then he coldly repeated, "*Rei!*" as he advanced a cautious step. "Are you not *Judoka?*"

The gun lifted. Ohara held his breath. Then it wavered and dropped. With a convulsive sob Roy fell to his knees, his forehead on the ground.

Ohara felt the tension leave his chest as he returned the bow. A quick survey of the dingy room revealed Koyama's White Pine

standing unharmed on a table. Only a small nick showed white against the dark blue bowl.

In deliberately simple words he spoke to Roy. "You have done bad things, Roy Tatsugi. Why did you take Koyama Sensei's treasure? Why do you shoot at those who come to help you?"

As he raised his head, Roy's heavy glasses obscured his expression. Ohara stared at them. From one lens a triangular piece was missing. Roy's mouth moved but no words came. Ohara sensed he would have to help him.

"Why did you steal the tree?"

The boy's doughy face flushed. "No steal. Take back tree. Bad man steal, try to burn. I see everyone die fire. Tree die too."

Watching the tears stream down from beneath the useless glasses, Ohara remembered how Roy's parents had died—in a fire. The tumbled words continued. "He burn. I saw iron box. Wood. Is true, true!"

"I understand, Roy. But why didn't you take the tree back to Koyama Sensei?"

Roy hung his head. "Afraid."

"Why were you afraid?"

The big fists smashed together. "I beat bad man hard. He fall down dead. Must hide, think what to do. Take tree home safe. But is hard to think."

"The gun?" Ohara prodded. "Why did you take the gun and shoot?"

"Must! Police come like before to take me bad place for kill man. Can't go back—ever—can't!"

"Roy, listen to me. You did not kill the man. He is not badly hurt. No one will send you to the bad place. I won't let them—your friend, Dr. Ito, won't let them. Do you believe me?"

For long seconds Roy stared back at Ohara. Then he flung himself forward to grasp Ohara's knees, hugging them as if he would never let go. From his body the faint acrid odor of plant spray came to Ohara's nostrils, as it had done years ago in his father's nursery—as it had when Roy, just back from spraying Koyama's plants, had attacked Stanley to save the White Pine.

Gently Ohara bent and lifted Roy up. Then he picked up the gun. As he thrust it into his waistband he said casually, "Are you hungry, Roy?"

Roy nodded and rubbed his stomach. "Hai! Hungry. I like noodles."

"You shall have them. But first we must take back the White Pine. You will carry it, please!"

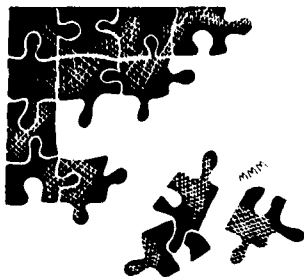
And so they came out to face the aimed rifles of the SWAT team.

Roy, his arms straining under his heavy burden, flinched and pulled back.

"It's all right, Roy," Ohara said. "You can give the White Pine to these officers. They will return it to Koyama Sensei. Then you and I and Dr. Ito will go and get some noodles. How would you like that?"

Roy nodded and surrendered the bonsai to the patrol officers. His happy kid's grin was in place as he turned back to Ohara. "Okay, noodles now!"

"Hai," Ohara answered. "Noodles—right now!"



DETECTIVERSE

ECONOMICAL MURDER

by *NANCY E. HAMILTON*

The rich Millicent Morehouse O'Fallon
Used a Datsun to run down her spouse Alan.
She explained, "My first choice
Was to use the Rolls-Royce,
But it gets far fewer miles to the gallon."

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DEPARTMENT OF "FIRST STORIES"

This is the 535th "first story" to be published by Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine . . . about a veteran police reporter who has covered one hundred and thirty murder cases and whose mind is an encyclopedia of murder lore . . .

The author, Dale L. Walker, was born August 3, 1935, in Decatur, Illinois. He has a B.A. from the University of Texas at El Paso, served in the U.S. Navy, 1955-59, and was a reporter, 1962-66. He has written nonfiction about John Reed, Jack London, Sherlock Holmes, A. Conan Doyle, and others . . .

THE BAILEY THEORY

by DALE L. WALKER

66 **W**ell, they think they got him," Bailey of the police beat said, slapping his sheaf of notes on his desk.

"Who thinks who got who?" asked Tanner, the *Sentinel's* assistant city editor, without looking up.

"Who else? The cops think they've got the Riverton Ripper, our town's contribution to the annals of multiple murder. You know, the three unsolved killings I've been writing about for the past two months. Or do you ever *read* this paper?"

"Oh, that," Tanner said, editing the city-hall reporter's copy with a long pair of scissors. "Now that I think about it, I have read some of your stuff on the case—pretty boring."

"Very funny." Bailey touched a kitchen match to his old briar and exhaled a cloud of bluish smoke. "Suspect's name is Ernest Joseph Pettigrew, age forty-four. He lives in an old apartment house on Bay, works on the loading dock at the glass factory. Lives alone, has one sister living here, no other close kin."

"What have the police got on him?"

"They're pretty sure they got the weapon, a Swiss hunting knife

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sharp as a razor, also some stuff from the victims which they call 'very incriminating.' They had a warrant and tossed his place real good, but they're not saying too much right now."

"Did you see Pettigrew? What'd he look like?"

"Cold, no emotions, mouth like a slit. He reminds me a lot of Bill Cook."

"Okay, I'll bite as usual," Tanner said, taking his cue and preparing to listen to Bailey dig out another nugget from his apparently bottomless mine of old-murder facts. "Who was Bill Cook?"

"Joplin, Missouri, December 1950 and January 1951. A good samaritan named Carl Mosser stopped and picked up a hitchhiker named William Cook. Cook killed Mosser, Mosser's wife, and their three kids, and dumped the bodies in a well. A couple of days later Cook killed a salesman named Dewey, then crossed the border into Mexico. Mexican cops caught him south of Tijuana and turned him over to California authorities. Cook got the gaspipe at San Quentin in December 1952. I covered the trial and remember Cook's eyes—like a shark's."

Bailey pointed his pipestem at Tanner and asked, "What's the news hole like?"

"Tight," Tanner answered. "Say, when are you going to get some real tobacco for that thing? What is it today, pocket lint or rug nap?"

"Look, for once I need some cooperation from you guys," Bailey said, ignoring Tanner's customary pipe witticism. "I want to do a big summary of the whole case—go back to the beginning when the first murder took place, show the work our cops did, and the whole story of how they finally nabbed Pettigrew. Also, I'd appreciate some room for a sidebar, a sort of thumbnail history of homicide in Riverton."

Tanner stuck the rolled city-hall story into the plastic tube that would be sucked through the pneumatic pipe to the composing room. "What kind of space are you talking about?"

"Forty inches?" Bailey tested.

"Forty inches?" Willis, the city editor, said, approaching from behind. "What have we got, Armageddon or World War Three?"

Bailey repeated both the story of Pettigrew's arrest and his plea for space.

"What's the competition got?" Willis asked, referring to the *Press*, Riverton's afternoon paper.

"Zip is what they got. Pettigrew was arrested where he works at two and the *Press* was already on the street. The TV boys were

downtown when the announcement was made, though.”

“I’m not worried about the TV boys,” Willis said in Tanner’s direction. “We’ve got the story, so let’s make the most of it.”

By six Bailey had completed a 1500-word story of Pettigrew’s arrest, the police announcement, the suspect’s background, vital statistics, and demeanor. By now the *Sentinel* newsroom was at full staff and noisy—a din of jangling telephones, clattering typewriters and wire service machines, a mixed squawking of police, fire, and ambulance radios, and a loud hubbub of reporters’ voices.

“Okay,” Willis said, setting his styrofoam cup of coffee on Bailey’s copy. “Most of this will make page one with the three-column art. Fisher got a nice shot of Pettigrew in cuffs being escorted to his arraignment. I’ll jump it to page three to finish the story. What else?”

“Let’s re-run the mug shots of the victims and let me do the sidebar on Riverton homicides. I’ve got the stuff in my files, so it’s no big research job. Tomorrow I’ll have enough for a long piece on Pettigrew. I’ve got a bunch of interviews lined up and I’m getting some poop on Pettigrew from a contact downtown.”

Sixteen hours later Bailey returned to his desk, via the *Sentinel* snackbar, carrying a cup of scorched coffee and two “Fresh Brand” sandwiches—which were stale—from the machine. Willis waved him over.

“How does ol’ Ernie stack up next to some of the nuts you know so much about?” Willis asked. He didn’t admit it out loud, nor did Tanner, but both were fascinated by Bailey’s murder lore.

“If Pettigrew is guilty, there are a lot of comparisons I can think of.” Bailey pulled a chair to Willis’ desk and retold the story of Bill Cook, the shark-eyed Joplin killer. “And Pettigrew is a known pill-head, sometime drunk, and barely literate. In this he is like Richard Speck who murdered those eight nurses in South Chicago in 1966. Our man worked as a garbageman too, like Speck and Charles Starkweather, the kid who tried to imitate James Dean but went off on a rampage with his fifteen-year-old girl friend in 1957 and ’58, killing nine people in the Midwest. Come to think of it, these guys have given garbagemen a bad name.”

“They’ve given *garbage* a bad name,” Willis said, hanging on Bailey’s words.

Bailey paused and sucked on his pipe. “Nice touch. You should

have got in this line of work. But to continue, they say Pettigrew is a misanthrope—hates damn near everybody. Like the case of Carl Panzram.”

The baited hook had been dropped and Willis snapped at it. “Carl who?”

“Panzram. One of the worst. He was from Minnesota, a drifter, pervert, petty criminal, and killer of at least twenty-one people. He was serving time at Leavenworth when he bludgeoned a prison laundry foreman to death. When some do-gooder groups tried to get his death sentence commuted, Panzram got mad as hell and even wrote to President Hoover demanding his right to be executed. They hanged him in 1930.”

After a brief intermission during which Willis gave one of his famous brimstone lectures to a bug-eyed young reporter, Willis drank the last of his coffee, grimaced, and tossed the cup in the wastebasket. “The three killings were done with a knife. What about a similarity to Manson?”

Bailey finished his second sandwich and relit his pipe.

“Not really. Manson probably never killed anybody. The cops have a wonderfully graphic two-syllable anatomical word for his type. It was Tex Watson, Susan Atkins, and that group that did Manson’s dirty work.”

At eight Bailey had completed his long Pettigrew story, together with a new recounting of the arrest and some added tidbits on the evidence against the accused man. Willis read the copy, pencil in hand, scrawled something on the upper margin, and threw it in one of the trays on his desk.

“Except for a couple of your usual lapses into the constabulary style, coming from your long association with cops and their pompous way of report-writing,” Willis said pontifically, waggling his pencil at Bailey, “this is real good. You’ve got a dossier on Pettigrew even his lawyer won’t have.”

Bailey yawned. “It’s been a long day.”

“One thing bothers me.” Willis tossed his pencil on the desk and leaned back, hands laced behind his head. “Yesterday you said ‘if Pettigrew is guilty.’ With the evidence they have on the guy, do you seriously doubt he’s guilty?”

Bailey blew a cloud of smoke. “As a matter of fact,” he replied, “I have only one small lingering doubt. The Bailey Theory has come into play.”

Willis waved his hand in front of his face, stirring up the pipe fog. "After deadline," he said, "let's have a beer and you can tell me about it. In the meantime, tell me something now: what are you smoking—old newspaper clippings?"

"Remember one thing," Bailey was saying. "When I keel over dead, probably from choking down one too many of our snackbar sandwiches, one of you real inventive, poetic, city-room people will write the head for my obit. It will say 'Veteran Reporter Dies.' The point is, *I am* a veteran reporter."

Bailey, Willis, and Tanner had found a booth in the back of Bronk's, a beer-and-barbecue place a block from the *Sentinel* office that served as a hangout for morning-paper reporters and a variety of other night workers. All had sipped the top inch of foam and beer from their mugs and Tanner had belched loudly.

"You will never meet a veteran police reporter who doesn't have a theory about criminals—murderers, in particular."

Willis said, through a yawn, "Very interesting, I'm sure, but if you don't think Pettigrew is guilty, why—?"

"I'm getting there. I've been doing this kind of work for twenty-seven years, twelve of them here on the *Sentinel*, the other fifteen years on six papers in six other cities. At last count I have covered one hundred and thirty murder cases, simple and complex, including four of multiple murder."

"Truly fascinating," Tanner added, with a glance at Willis.

"After about the second dozen murders I began noticing a pattern—nothing to do with the murderers themselves—a pattern about the people I interviewed in connection with the murderer or suspected murderer. See, I always make a point to question a suspect's neighbors, co-workers, relatives, friends, whoever I can get to talk. It makes good copy and people generally will open up if you know how to approach them. I figure I've interviewed at least a thousand people in connection with various killers, and there is a pattern."

"Well, what the hell *is* it?" Tanner said. He and Willis had stopped yawning.

"It's simply this: people who are personally acquainted with persons charged with murder invariably express disbelief that their friend, neighbor, or relative could be guilty."

"Huh?" Willis said, and Tanner added, "I don't get it."

Bailey fired his pipe. "I know it sounds like a crock, that it's

unscientific, but in all my personal experience I've never known a case in which a friend, neighbor, landlady, co-worker, or anybody with even a passing knowledge of an accused killer, was *ever* correct in evaluating the guilt or innocence of the accused killer. Nobody ever says, 'Yeah, he's guilty as hell all right. I always knew he'd kill somebody some day.' What they say is, 'I don't believe it! He's the nicest person in the world—gave my boy Harold a dollar one time—took care of his sick mother—worked weekends as a volunteer at the hospital.'

"You've heard all that, haven't you?"

"Yeah, I've heard it," Willis said. "In fact, I remember people saying what a nice guy that Whitman was, the one who went up in the tower in Texas—"

"And those forty-six people, sixteen of them dead plus his wife and mother earlier. Now, you've got the picture," Bailey said.

"You mean people *always* say stuff like that—every time?" Tanner asked.

"Maybe not every time, but close enough. I've even researched it a little. Howard Unruh of Camden, New Jersey, in September 1949, killed thirteen people in eleven minutes with a nine-millimeter German Luger. He'd been a war hero and just went berserk. 'Quiet,' everybody said, 'why, they've surely arrested the wrong man.' Ed Gein of Plainfield, Wisconsin. He was a farmer, a murderer, ghoul, and cannibal. They found parts of fifteen women in his farmhouse in 1957. 'Oi' Ed?' everybody said, 'why, he couldn't wring a chicken's neck—give you the shirt right off his back—must be some mistake.' "

Willis jumped in: "I remember one. I was working in Denver in 1955 when it happened. A young guy took out some insurance policies on his mom, planted a bomb in her luggage, and her plane blew up, killing her and everybody on board. He was one of those 'nicest boys you'd ever want to meet' types."

"Jack Gilbert Graham," Bailey dredged up from his mine. "The plane was a DC-6 with forty-four people on board, including the crew. Graham got the gas chamber in '57. What people said about Graham they said about Cook, Speck, Starkweather, Tex Watson and company, even Panzram. People who knew them said 'impossible, can't be—lovely human being—harmless.' Remember William Heirens? He was the psycho who killed three women in Chicago in the mid '40's, butchered a little girl and dropped the parts of her body in sewers all over town. He scrawled on a mirror, 'For Heaven's

sake, catch me before I kill more.' When the police finally got him, nobody believed it. Heirens was 'a model boy,' and 'a sweet kid,' and the cops were accused of blaming the crimes on Heirens because they were being pressured to solve the case."

"Okay, I get your drift," Willis said, "but what's it got to do with Pettigrew?"

Bailey leaned forward. "I've interviewed sixteen people who are closest to Pettigrew, who know him best, including his sister, his employer, co-workers, neighbors, his barber, bartender, landlady, and so on.

"Listen to this." He pulled his notes from his jacket and thumbed through them.

"Some examples. Pettigrew's landlady, Doris Neeley, says she hates Pettigrew's guts, said he kicked her dog, slammed the door in her face when she was collecting for the United Fund, and told her to go to hell when she said good morning to him. She called him, and I quote, 'a lazy lout and a snake,' and said she didn't doubt for a minute he murdered those people. Pettigrew's boss at the glass factory, Adam Martin, said Pettigrew is a bum, shows up late and leaves early, dogs it on the job and is a goldbrick. Said Pettigrew is hated by everybody on the loading dock—which I have confirmed—and said he was about to fire him when the cops saved him the trouble."

"I'm beginning to get the Bailey Theory," Willis interrupted.

"Pettigrew's sister, Mrs. Eileen Swift, said she has been estranged from her brother for ten years and has never even spoken to him in that time. Said he is lazy, violent, a leech, and a drinker, used nasty language in front of her kids, and is glad she married and didn't have to carry the same family name as his. She begged me not to use her maiden name in the paper because she didn't want people to know she was related to him. I asked her whether she planned to visit him in jail if he was found guilty and if she realized he might get the death penalty. She said no to the first question and 'I don't care, he probably deserves it' to the second."

Bailey swigged the last of his beer.

"Not one of these people has a single *good* thing to say about Ernest Joseph Pettigrew."

"So from this you think he's innocent?" Tanner asked incredulously. "What all this tells me is that Pettigrew is a habitual bad guy. He *fits* my idea of what a killer is like."

"I'm not saying he's innocent," Bailey answered, "but it makes

me wonder. If this kind of testimony is almost invariably wrong, then it could be wrong now, and if it's wrong now, Pettigrew might be taking a bum rap."

"Bailey?"

Bailey dropped the receiver, reeled it off the floor by the cord, and got it to his ear. "Yeah. What time is it?"

"Clean the cobwebs, Bailey, you guys are supposed to be like us, always at work. This is Rasmussen, your friendly 'informed source' at the police station. I've got something you ought to know."

"Wait a minute," Bailey said, pulling himself up in bed and squeezing his eyes shut as he switched on the bedside lamp. "What have you got?"

"If I ever get accused of police brutality, I'll expect you to gloss it over in your paper in return for this one. We've got another suspect in the Ripper killings."

"Huh? What do you mean another suspect? What happened to Pettigrew?"

"He's still in the slam up here, but the new guy was just picked up. Lived in the same apartment house as Pettigrew and the evidence right now is that the new guy, name of Louis Houser, planted some of the stuff they found at Pettigrew's place and in general put the frame on Pettigrew."

"How good a suspect is he?" Bailey asked, taking notes.

"From what I hear, real good."

"I'll be down soon. And thanks, Rasmussen."

"Don't mention it—and I mean that literally. If anybody asks how you learned about Houser, give 'em that clever line of yours about the little bird."

"Don't worry," Bailey said, hanging up and scratching his head.

In the *Sentinel* snackbar Bailey dropped three quarters in the slot for a "Fresh Brand" ham and cheese and pulled the lever. The sandwich fell with a suspiciously stale "thunk" into the food tray. Willis, blowing on his coffee, was seated at one of the sticky formica-topped tables when Bailey joined him.

"I just sent your story on Houser down. Compared to what the *Press* had, yours looks good. We're a little thin on who Houser is. Have you got some stuff working?"

"Plenty," Bailey said, stripping the cellophane from his ham and cheese and feeling the bread.

"What are you going to write about Pettigrew tomorrow?"

"Mostly that he's still in jail. The cops won't release much information, but my sources down there say it looks pretty good for Pettigrew to be released and Houser to be indicted."

"What do you think?" Willis asked.

"Well, I just spoke to Houser's landlady, Doris Neeley, same one who called Pettigrew a snake."

"What'd she have to say?"

"She didn't believe it when I told her Houser had been arrested. She said he's the nicest man in the world—wouldn't hurt a flea."

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DEPARTMENT OF "FIRST STORIES"

This is the 536th "first story" to be published by Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine . . . about the "fragility of life," and a crime that, to say the least, is unusual . . .

The author, Kevin Kotowski, was twenty-five when he submitted his first story. In a later letter he wrote: "I have an elephant on my back. Now, I know most people have monkeys, but this is an elephant with large laughing elephant eyes and Dumbo ears and a long curling trunk. Since he showed up, life has never been the same. You see, this elephant knows I want to be a writer. He picks me up in front of the TV and puts me down in front of the typewriter . . . his trumpeting wakes me in the middle of the night, and in general he makes a nuisance of himself. I hope he never goes away. Because, as everyone knows, elephants never forget" . . .

THE METAMORPHOSIS OF PROFESSOR HIGGINS

by KEVIN KOTOWSKI

I got to class late the morning Professor Higgins turned into a butterfly. In fact, I arrived as he was leading English 101 outside to the fields behind the college. This was not unusual. The Professor often preferred to lecture outdoors when the weather was mild.

"Ah, Egan," he said, "glad to see you could make it."

"Yes, sir. Sorry I'm late."

"No matter. Come along."

He led us a short distance into the grass and wild flowers. "This looks like a good spot," he said, and promptly became a butterfly—a large orange and black one, a monarch, *Danaus plexippus*.

There were perhaps ten of us present and we must have looked

© 1979 by Kevin Kotowski.

a sight, some of us wildly chasing the fluttering insect, others standing mystified and gaping. One of the girls, a sensitive young thing with high cheekbones and sea-green eyes, fainted dead away. I paid no attention to her, but joined in chasing the Professor through the underbrush. I was amazed at how this bald, overweight little man had so easily transformed himself into such a beautiful, delicate creature.

The butterfly—rather, the Professor—came to rest on some marigolds. The class rushed up and fell among the flowers, not quite believing what we had seen. There was silence. Finally someone, I don't remember who, asked, "Uh, Professor, is that you?"

In the Professor's thin old voice the butterfly said, "Puff, puff, out of shape, puff, puff, not used to this, puff, of course, puff, it's me."

We all exhaled, sighed, stared at the out-of-breath Professor, then at each other for reassurance.

"Puff, puff. Give me a minute."

We waited.

"There. Much better. Thank you."

Jerry Spooner, a juvenile delinquent from Chicago's west side, said, "How did you do that?"

I could see what was going through his mind. Next time he held up a liquor store or snatched a purse, presto-chango, he'd fly away—free as a butterfly. Make an awfully small target, too.

"Oh, it's nothing really."

"But how did you do it?"

"Anyone can do it. You merely have to concentrate, that's all."

Jerry closed his eyes and wrinkled his brow in concentration. But nothing happened. I could imagine hundreds of liquor-store clerks getting back up off their knees, Amens still on their lips.

"It don't work," said Jerry.

The butterfly said nothing. If Higgins really knew, I could see he wasn't about to tell us any more.

"Stand back," the Professor said. "Let me see what I can do."

He took off, soaring about three feet up, then dipping to glide just above the grass and flower tops. A few wingbeats to gain altitude and he banked and came skimming back across the field to land on top of Judy Chapman's blonde head. Judy giggled. But then she always giggled.

"Well," said the Professor from atop Judy, "that's much better. I'm beginning to get used to this."

"But why Professor? Why did you change?"

The Professor's wings beat a few times and his antenna wavered. "Because I'm getting on in years and I thought this would be a good way to spend my remaining time. Also"—he paused—"I wished to make an example of myself in order to teach you something."

Judy giggled again. "You mean you did this just to teach us something?"

"Precisely, Judy. I metamorphosed into this butterfly to show you what any of you could be."

"Like Kafka's cockroach," Suzanne Myers said—she was always ready with a literary allusion.

Everyone groaned. I think even the Professor. Suzie blushed.

"Sorry," she said.

"No," said the Professor, "I want you to realize that you can be anything you wish. You're young, on the threshold of adult life, and it's up to you to make the decisions and choices that you'll be facing in the future. No one will do it for you."

"You mean any one of us can be a butterfly?"

"Or a President or"—he swiveled his body to look at Jerry—"a thief. But the choice will be entirely up to you. And no one else. If you make the wrong choice, there'll be nobody to blame but yourself. Not society, not your parents, only you."

There was much clearing of throats and staring at the ground. Personally, I'd heard it all before and much better expressed.

"What are you going to do now, Professor?"

"I don't know. But for some reason I feel I have to fly that way."

The butterfly turned on top of Judy's head and faced south. A boy named Serma spoke up. "Oh, wow. I know where you're going. The Sierra Madre Mountains in Mexico. The monarch migrates and winters there."

"But that must be two thousand miles from here," I said.

Serma nodded.

"Gosh, Professor," Suzie Myers said, "aren't you afraid you'll get eaten or something?"

"No, the Professor will just change back into the Professor."

"No, you're wrong," Higgins said. "This is the form I will remain in for the rest of my life."

"Hey, Professor, what about our grades?"

"I suspect you'll have a substitute till the end of the term. When I don't show up for class, the school will probably send someone to my apartment. I will be placed on the missing persons list and it will be assumed I have disappeared of my own free will. The gossip

will flow and a year from now it will be common knowledge that I left town in the company of a pair of strange women to begin a drug-smuggling operation in South America."

Judy giggled. "Don't worry, Professor. We'll tell them the truth—what really happened."

"Who would believe you, Judy?"

I had to admit that the Professor had it covered real well. No one would believe us.

We talked some more, asking a few questions, but not many. What do you ask a butterfly besides how does it feel? (Small, he said.)

Every once in a while the Professor would take off and fly about the field, then come back to land on top of somebody's head. Jerry Spooner asked him to do a few barrel-rolls, but the Professor refused. I guess he thought it was beneath his dignity.

After about an hour the Professor said, "Well, it's getting late. You'd better go back or you'll be late for your next class. Goodbye and don't forget what I told you."

Some of the girls began to cry and a couple of them wanted to kiss Higgins goodbye. The Professor shuddered. I don't know if he was crying or just afraid someone was going to take a chunk out of his wings by mistake.

The class drifted off, but I remained.

"Get going, Egan. Or you'll be late."

"I don't have a class till this afternoon."

"Oh. Well, you could use the time to study. I'm sure you need that."

"Well, you see, Professor, that's kind of what I wanted to talk to you about."

"Go on."

"My grade. I was wondering if you could tell me what I've got so far?"

"I think you already know."

"I guess that means I'm failing."

"Remember what I said, Egan, about choices."

"Yes, sir, I do. I suppose there's nothing you can do to change my grade, is there?"

"No, there isn't. But there are four weeks left until the end of the term. I'm sure, if you want to, you could make a passing grade. The choice is yours."

"Yes, Professor, I guess the choice is mine."

I stood up. The Professor was sitting on a dandelion.

"Professor, I want to thank you. I mean for being an example to me. For showing me I have to make my own decisions."

"Why, you're welcome, Egan. And good luck."

I held out my hand as if to shake.

"And good luck to you."

With a swift motion I pinched the butterfly's wings between my thumb and forefinger.

All the way home the Professor struggled and pleaded with me. He pleaded as I put him in the jar and he pleaded as I added the chloroform. One of the boys at school—he's majoring in entomology—says it's one of the largest and finest specimens of monarch he's ever seen. He even offered to buy it from me, but I refused. I like it where it is, mounted in its own frame on the wall above my desk. I keep it there as an example—to remind me of the fragility of life, of how an unexpected twist of fate can alter any of our decisions.

"Q"

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DEPARTMENT OF SECOND STORIES

Exactly two years ago, in the January 1978 issue of EQMM, we published Barbara Owens' first appearance in print. Her story, titled "The Cloud Beneath the Eaves," won the highest honor a mystery short story can achieve: it was awarded the coveted Edgar by MWA (Mystery Writers of America) as the best mystery short story published in American magazines and books during 1978.

Now, two years to the month, we give you Barbara Owens' second story, and it will surprise no one that the second story is altogether different from the first in characters, theme, and locale. But the two stories do have one thing in common, that priceless ingredient, that indispensable component—quality.

The old man in the wheelchair, living alone in the remote desert, and the young man coming out of nowhere . . . the old man a crack shot, the young man with a menacing flicker behind his smile . . .

A LITTLE PIECE OF ROOM

by BARBARA OWENS

He came out of the red haze that hung like a dirty curtain between the old man and the setting sun.

Seated on the little porch, watching him come, the old man savored the cold itch in the fingers inching down his useless thigh, curling into the heavy boot top and the strap there that held the gun. The closer the boy, the heavier grew the sweet, sour smell of death. Dobey knew it, had always been able to sense it, and had never been wrong about it yet.

Something about Dobey's silent watching made the boy draw up uncertainly by the well. Hunching under his heavy pack, he sent Dobey a wide friendly smile. The old man waited, watching the boy's

1979 by Barbara Owens.

eyes sweep casually, knowing everything was being catalogued behind them click, click, click—from the dead pickup rusting in the desert sun to the absence of telephone and electric wires, to his own solitary self in the rickety old wheelchair. He saw the boy's measured look at his hand tucked deep inside his boot, and even across the twenty-odd feet between them he caught the quick ugly flicker behind the boy's smile.

The boy cleared his throat. "Uh, sir? Saw your place from the highway back there and wondered if I could trouble you for some water. Old canteen's just about dry."

He reached back to loosen his pack, suppressing a smile as Dobey's arm tensed visibly at the action. Moving slowly and carefully, the boy unslung a guitar, propping it and the pack against the well platform. He pulled a canteen from his pack and shook it playfully. "Just about a goner. Can you spare a fill?"

East, Dobey thought—that voice don't come from noplac round here. He jerked his head at the well and watched the boy haul up the bucket, drink, fill his canteen, and then empty the bucket over his head, water matting his hair and beard and running down the dusty jeans to steam in puddles at his feet. He laughed, shaking himself like a dog. "Oh, man, I needed that!" Inhaling deeply, he grinned across at Dobey. "You just saved my life, sir, and I thank you. I was about done in for sure."

Dobey waited, letting him play his part. Now he wheeled curiously, as if noticing the remote, desolate setting for the first time.

"Well, I'd say you like your privacy, Mr.—?" The boy paused, waiting. "I'll bet I've walked five or six miles and you're the first living thing I've seen."

Dobey spoke. "What you doin' out here on foot? Break down on the road?"

Responding as to an invitation, the boy eased down against the well wall and leaned back with a grateful sigh. "No, sir, not me. I hitch. Thought I had a ride from Phoenix to Needles, but somewhere back up the road there the nice man made me an offer I had to refuse." He grinned wryly.

"Kick you out?"

"Something like that." He sighed again, closing his eyes.

The sun disappeared behind distant mountains and cold blue dusk settled across the desert floor, bringing with it the sounds that brought the desert to life at night. Keeping his eye on the big blond boy slumped against his well, Dobey carefully drew his hand away

from the gun, letting it rest lightly on his knee, within easy reach. The first stars gleamed in the pale overhead and when he looked back from them, the boy was eyeing him with a flat calculating stare. The smell he carried filled the space between them, and for the first time in years something in Dobey came alive, the electric anticipation of combat coursing through him. It came so quickly and with such force, it took him by surprise.

"What they call you?" he blurted loudly.

The boy gazed steadily at him. "Mitch," he said finally. "They call me Mitch. You?"

"I'm Dobey."

"Pleased to meet you, Dobey." Again the practised, winning smile.

"You one of them college fellas?"

"Was. Gave it up." Then carefully, casually, "Say, Dobey, I don't want to put you out any, but I wonder would it be all right if I stayed here tonight? Don't much like walking the desert at night. I can just throw my bedroll anywhere."

Dobey watched the innocent blue eyes while his mind laid things in their proper places. "Gets pretty cold out here at night. Guess you could sleep in the truck. It don't run," he added pointedly.

"I know." Mitch grinned. "I noticed that when I came."

They sat silently, and after a time Dobey wheeled himself inside the one-room shack and closed the door. He listened until he heard the boy prowling around the truck, and then came the mellow sounds of the guitar. Blood racing, Dobey edged against the back wall, facing the door, gun lying ready in his lap.

For over an hour he watched the moonlit window and listened to the music. Then, when the music stopped, he waited for stealthy footsteps on the front porch. Somewhere out in the night rose the threshing animal sounds of struggle and a high death squeal. Then the footsteps came. Dobey straightened in his chair.

"Boy?" He spoke softly through the closed door. "You got a gun out there? Less'n you do and can shoot as good as me, you'd best back off while you can. From here I can dump your belly all over the porch. You ever seen a gut-shot man, boy?"

The silence stretched. Dobey's heart hammered thickly in his ears. Then there was a rustle, a snick of metal, and soft steps padded away across the sand. The old man let out his breath with a grunt. He leaned back in his chair, muscles jumping. He felt himself grinning and the taste of acid lay heavy on his tongue. After a long while he napped lightly in his chair.

At the first pink streaks of dawn he rolled to the window. The boy was there, squatting against the well. He was silent, watching, as Dobey wheeled out onto the porch, hand resting just inside his boot. The old man ignored him, squinting out across the scrub, rock, and sand.

"I growed up with guns," Dobey announced to the general area, and spit with satisfaction. "Ain't nobody in these parts better'n me. I forget how many medals they give me during the war."

"Would that be World War Two?" The soft voice was edged with a sneer.

"That's right."

"That's been over thirty years, old man."

"Ain't no worse now than I was then. I shoot some every day and I never miss." He lowered his gaze to meet the boy full on, and Mitch was the first to look away. "There ain't nothin' here worth stealin', boy, less'n it's my gun and you ain't never going to get that."

For the first time Mitch's eyes showed a trace of sincerity. "I don't want your gun, Dobey. I've got no use for guns."

Dobey reached through the open door behind him and drew out a pair of field glasses, training them on the highway and slowly scanning its empty scope.

Mitch straightened slightly. "What're you looking for?"

"Nothin'," Dobey answered shortly. "Same as always. Road don't get much travel."

"Can you see the highway? That must be a good half mile."

"I see it. See everything that moves on it, and I know most every car. Didn't see any strange one yesterday, like that fella's you rode up with from Phoenix."

Silence. "Yeah?" Mitch said. "That's funny. Maybe he turned off another road after I got out."

Dobey hung the glasses carefully around his neck. "Soon's you wash up and eat, you'll be on your way then." It wasn't a question, and the boy's smile flickered again before he rose slowly and stretched, grinning across the space between them.

"That's right," he said softly. "That's what I'll do."

They ate, Dobey brewing coffee on his camp stove while he watched the boy through the window dig something from his pack and stretch out on the tailgate, facing the shack. "Coffee sure smells good," he called, but Dobey didn't answer.

After eating, Mitch brought his packed gear to the well platform and repeated his performance of the day before. Then he looked

across at Dobey in the window. "Want me to draw some up for you before I go?"

"I can manage," Dobey said. He saw Mitch eye the makeshift pulley system rigged between the well and porch, but the boy said nothing. He looked off toward the highway.

"Getting hot already."

"It does that."

Dobey rolled to the doorway, hand close at his knee. Not being a man of emotion, he didn't understand or feel comfortable with the conflicting senses of danger and sudden kinship with this stranger, this boy who stalked him in the night. He wanted him to go.

Mitch was speaking slowly. "Dobey, I'd like to do something for you before I go. In exchange for your hospitality. And to say I'm sorry about last night. I'm not really—after you've been on the road a while you get—" He stopped. "Well, I think maybe I can fix your truck. I'm a pretty fair mechanic." He sounded almost shy.

"Ain't going to do *me* no good if you do," Dobey said bluntly.

Mitch shot him a bleak look. Then he took one slow step toward the porch, and in his mind's eye Dobey watched a rattler coiling quietly in upon itself.

"I'm not going to steal your truck, man!" Dobey's gun hand twitched, sweat oozed under his arms, but just as suddenly the tension passed, and Mitch said hesitantly, "Just trying to apologize for last night."

There was a long silence. Then Dobey surprised himself. "Help yourself, then. They's some tools under the front seat, but I don't think they'll do you no good."

"I'd like to try."

"All right."

All morning he sat on the porch watching the boy and the highway, tossing occasional shots at strategically placed tin cans and rocks. Just before noon Mitch came to the well, slick and shiny with sweat. He drank deeply.

"I've been watching you shoot. You sure told the truth, man. You never miss."

"I know it."

"Listen, I can't fix that thing. Needs parts."

"Don't matter, I told you."

Mitch sank down with a sigh. They stayed a while in suddenly easy silence. Finally Mitch said, "Tell me something. What're you doing way out here?"

"It suits me."

"Don't get me wrong, but how do you get on—food, supplies, and things? Who takes care of you?"

Dobey stiffened, glaring across at him. "I take care of myself!" he snapped. "Always have, always will. Just 'cause my legs is gone don't mean I need a keeper!"

The boy reddened. He looked away from Dobey's furious face. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean—"

"Aw, hell, there's always somebody after me. Damn church in town has took me on—preacher comes out once a week to bring me food and shells—and if it ain't too hot, sometimes some of the ladies comes with him, cluckin' round here cleanin' up, emptyin' my slops, tryin' to get me to move into town and civi-ly-za-tion!" He spat disgust into the sand and stopped, surprised. He couldn't remember when he'd made as long a speech.

Mitch was grinning. "Why don't you shoot them? You never miss."

"Don't laugh, boy!" Dobey said, grinning himself. "Once they come out to take me in by force, by God, and I run 'em off with a double barrel. They scattered out of here like a bunch of prairie hens. They give up on me after that."

Mitch shook his head. "You are something. You must be the last original man."

"Yeah, well, the state police still comes around ever' day in one of them helicopters. If I don't give 'em a wave, they set down and come runnin' over to see if a jackrabbit's eat me."

He watched with secret glee as Mitch tensed, absorbing this. After a minute the boy asked casually, "Every day?"

"Yeah. They're checkin' the road anyway for fools lost or broke down, so they take a swing by here."

Mitch glanced up at the sky. "Any special time?"

"Oh, long about noon, give or take," Dobey said, enjoying himself.

"Well," Mitch said quickly, glancing at his watch, "heat's really up. Think I'll grab a bite to eat and maybe take a snooze. All right if I use the truck?"

"Sure. You do that."

Mitch started for it, then stopped. "Don't suppose you've got a radio. Lost mine somewhere. Be nice to have some music."

"Got one of them little transistor jobs, but it's busted."

"Well, I flunked out on the truck. Maybe I can fix your radio."

Dobey reached behind him through the door and tossed the radio across. He chuckled as he watched Mitch stow all his gear out of

sight before he crawled into the cab. Kid took him for a fool. He shook his head, wondering why he was going along with it. When the 'copter hovered overhead some time later, he returned the pilot's wave as usual, keenly aware that Mitch was watching the signal through the sprung truck door.

Late in the afternoon a jackrabbit ventured too close to the shack, and Dobey's shot brought Mitch staggering from the cab. He looked white and sick from heat. Dobey hesitated, seeing the boy and the distance he would have to roll to retrieve the rabbit.

"If you'll bring me over that jack, we'll have rabbit stew for supper, boy."

Wordlessly Mitch plodded into the sand and returned with the dangling, bloody carcass.

"Just lay it down there by the fire and then you back off by the well."

He did, flopping down with a groan. Dobey lowered himself awkwardly off the porch, tipping the chair first one way and then the other, keeping his face toward Mitch and his hand near the gun. At the stone firepit he pulled a hunting knife from his boot, quickly skinned and gutted the jack, and dropped it in the large iron kettle. From one shirt pocket he took an onion, a carrot from another, and with just a pass at cleaning, added them to the pot.

Mitch lay on one side, watching. "Really ready for that rabbit, weren't you?"

As the fire blazed up, Dobey backed away, keeping it between them. "Now you put enough water in to cover it," he said, and soon the rich smell of cooking meat wafted up from the old iron kettle.

They watched each other warily across the fire as the moon rose, laying a strong white light over them. After a while Mitch went to the truck and brought back his guitar. He leaned against the well, fingering it softly. The night air was cool enough to enjoy the heat from the fire.

"That sounds fine," Dobey said finally.

"You like music?"

"Some. Country. I like country."

"Which ones?"

"I dunno. 'Red River Valley,' I guess. I remember that one."

Mitch played it, singing the words as Dobey nodded along. "That's a good one," Dobey said when it was done.

Mitch grinned, putting the guitar aside. "Who the hell are you, Dobey? Where'd you come from?"

"Why you want to know?"

"I admire you. You're what I'd like to be—an original man. I'd like to know about you."

"Ain't nothin' to tell."

"What happened to your legs?"

Later Dobey could never explain how he came to tell this strange boy the story of his life. The night wore on and the stew came and went as he talked—of his boyhood in the Arkansas county orphanage, of running away and bumming around the country, of the army and how he liked it and belonged to it and decided to make it his home, then of the wounds that took him out of it and would keep his nerves deteriorating until his legs became useless. "I was supposed to go back to one of them vet's hospitals when that happened, so they could prop me up somewheres to make baskets the rest of my days."

He told of the gas station he ran out on the highway until he could no longer handle it and how, over protest, he then moved into the old broken-down maintenance shed and spent his days wondering about things, watching the highway with field glasses, and shooting at rocks and cans.

"Just an old cripple, but I get along," he concluded with throat hoarse and dry. "I got my pension. Don't want nothin' else but to be let alone with a little piece of room." He stopped, embarrassed. He'd never told such things to another living soul.

The boy was quiet, gazing into the dying fire. "That is it, that's really it," he murmured finally, more to himself than Dobey. "A little piece of room." The eyes that met Dobey's were far too old and tired. "There's a lot of us cripples around, old man. You just handle it better than most."

Dobey said nothing. He thought he was on the verge of seeing inside the boy, almost but not quite.

"When you were in the army," Mitch said after a pause, "you ever kill anyone?"

"I did."

"You like it?" The question was soft, so soft the old man almost missed it.

He remembered. The thrill that had no name, the rage, the power, the release. "Yes," he said simply. "I liked it."

Mitch nodded slowly. Their eyes met again and Dobey felt it, the bond that sealed them forever.

"Well," Mitch said, "it's been a long day." He rose and stood look-

ing across at Dobey sitting motionless in his wheelchair. "I'd be glad to help you get that thing back up on the porch."

"I can do it."

"I know you can do it. I'd just be glad to help."

Dobey looked up into the shadowed eyes. "All right."

He watched him come across the sand. He sat stiffly upright as Mitch stepped behind him and wheeled him to the house, tipping the chair easily up onto the old wooden porch. Dobey rolled slowly to face him. The night was suddenly still.

"Okay?" Mitch asked.

"Okay."

Mitch turned and started for the truck.

"Tomorrow," Dobey said, "about noon, when it gets hot"—the boy stopped, waiting—"there's a drywash on the far side of that butte yonder's carved out a kind of lip from the rock. Ain't bad protection, you know, from the sun?"

Mitch's grin came slow in the moonlight. "Thanks. I'll try it. I just about died in that truck today, you old lizard."

Dobey rolled onto his cot and slept the best night's sleep he could remember.

At dawn the boy was waiting by the well. Smiling, he held out a handful of silver rings.

"Know what you need? A ramp. I took these off my pack and if you've got some nails and a length of rope handy, we're going to be in business."

Dobey hawked and spat into the sand. "Out back," he said. "I'll make us some coffee."

They ate side by side on the porch, then Dobey watched while Mitch fashioned a ramp from some old boards. He rigged the rope and rings to the house and porch so Dobey could pull and lower himself with ease. It was so simple and worked so well, Dobey wondered why he'd never thought of it before.

They rested while the temperature climbed. Mitch sighed. "You really had the right idea, you know. A man could be at peace here forever."

Dobey lowered the glasses and squinted toward the highway. "Preacher's comin'," he said.

By the time the dusty old car negotiated the narrow bumpy lane and the preacher stepped out fanning himself with his hat, Mitch was safely down behind the butte in the drywash. Before he left, the preacher complimented Dobey on his fine new ramp, and Dobey

said he didn't know why he'd never thought of it before.

That night they ate fresh bacon and beans in the firelight, then Mitch sang and played, beginning and ending with "Red River Valley."

Days passed, and then it had been a week since Dobey had watched a menacing stranger coming down his lane. In daylight he still watched the road and pot-shotted into the desert sands. Mitch rigged some new targets for him and did odd jobs until it came time each day to wait out the heat and the helicopter in the drywash. They met for comfortable moments as if they'd always been together, and at night they sat together before the fire, sometimes for hours in quiet companionship.

On one such night Mitch broke a long silence by informing Dobey it was time he learned to play the guitar.

"The hell," Dobey said. "Don't know the first thing about it."

"You'll learn. Come on."

Over Dobey's protests he showed the old man how to hold it, and sitting crosslegged before him, patiently took him step by step through the chords for "Red River Valley." The moon rose full and high, and life began and ended all around them in the night, but Dobey, wet with sweat and knotted concentration, plowed doggedly through the motions over and over again. Several times he spat and gave up in disgust, but Mitch coaxed and bullied until, muttering vicious curses, he'd pick it up and try again. At last, with Mitch singing along, he made it through an entire halting, almost recognizable version and lay back in his chair, amazed.

"Well, I'll be damned!" he said, and Mitch fell over laughing.

They sat grinning at each other like a pair of fools. Mitch threw back his head and breathed deeply of the cold night air. "Oh, man!" he said, as if that expressed it all.

"You got any folks, boy?" Dobey asked suddenly.

For a minute Mitch didn't move, but something changed swiftly in the night, something Dobey could almost reach out and touch. When at last the boy lowered his eyes, they didn't match his smiling mouth.

"Sure," he said easily. "Why do you ask?"

"Just wondered. They know where you are?"

The smile tried to die, but Mitch held it steady. "I'm a big boy now, Dobey. I don't have to ask permission."

Dobey knew plainly he should let it alone. "I just figured if you was my boy—"

"Well, I'm not your boy, old man. I'm not anybody's boy."

The voice was even, but the eyes were slitted, and something tickled at the hairs on the back of Dobey's neck. "You ain't from around here," he pushed on stubbornly.

"No," Mitch said after a pause.

"Back east?"

Slowly Mitch slid away across the sand, putting the fire between them. Again Dobey felt he was watching something cold and deadly coiled to strike. The fingers of his right hand trembled slightly on his knee above the gun.

"Say, I don't aim to pry. You don't have to tell me nothin' you don't want to."

They watched one another over the flickering fire. Mitch was frowning, weighing, his eyes reflecting the distorted dancing of the flames.

"Dobey," he said slowly, "you're the only friend I ever had. You remember what you said the other night? About a little piece of room?" He waited until the old man nodded. "That made a lot of sense to me, made it all fall into place. It's what I've got to have, but I never knew what to call it until now. A little piece of room. To be what you want to be, do what you want to do, and nobody to tell you different. That right?"

"I guess."

"Sure it is. You did it. And I'm going to do it. I come from a long line of successes, Dobey. You know what a success is? It's doing and being the right thing in front of other people. It's country clubs and board meetings, the right marriage and setting a good example. Making the best impression at all times and money—lots and lots and never enough of it, money. You get that from the time you can understand what it is that's expected of you, the last in a long line of successes!" His words hissed across the fire.

"You see," he explained, leaning closer, "there's no room in a long line of successes for anyone who's different, who's crazy enough to want something else. That calls for drastic measures. We've got to whip that misguided someone into shape, get that someone back in line, lean on that someone until he breaks. Crowd him, Dobey, crowd him, crowd him"—he broke off suddenly with a big smile. "You know, here with you this past week, it's the first time in my life I've ever felt good? Relaxed, not tense, you know? Not crowded." He shook his head gently. "I can't take being crowded any more." Eyes glittering, he whispered fiercely, "Don't let anyone take it from you,

old man! They'll try. Don't you let anyone into your little piece of room!"

Dobey swallowed drily. "You goin' any place in particular?"

For a minute Mitch stared blankly. Then he shook his head and sat back, laughing. "Man, how'd I get off on that?" As Dobey watched, the wildness in Mitch's face faded. "Oh, I don't know. I'd started out for California. But I sure do like it here."

"Redwoods," Dobey said, anxious to keep the subject changing. "Always thought I'd like to see one of them redwoods."

"Not the ocean?"

"Shoot, I seen oceans."

"Well, my friend, when I get there I'll take a picture of those redwoods and send it to you, okay?" As quickly as it came, his former mood was gone.

Dobey smiled. "That'd be fine," he said.

Back inside the cabin he stayed sitting by the window, looking out into the night and wondering what it was that had just taken place. There was no sound or sign of movement from the truck.

He was dozing when a flash of light crossed his eyes. A car turned off the highway, pulled a short way into the lane, and stopped. The lights went out. A minute later a blast of music rolled across the desert floor. Dobey reached for his glasses and trained them on the shadows inside.

After a minute he tossed them aside. "Damn kids!"

The music went on for a long time, cutting through the night air. Dobey was nodding again when he heard the car door slam and the sound of voices. Two figures started toward him, stumbling and giggling down the lane. Music still played inside the car. Dobey rested his hand over his boot.

As they drew closer, he could see one was a girl, and she was protesting in a loud whisper, "Come on, honey, let's go back. I'm scared."

The boy hooted, a ragged adolescent voice. "Aw, he's just a crippled old coot. We'll have a little fun."

Dobey drew back from the window as they stopped a short distance from the porch.

"Hey, old coot!" the boy called out drunkenly. "You got anything to drink in there?"

"Billy," the girl whined, backing toward the well, "you come on now."

He giggled, motioning her to stay. "Hey! We're dry out here! You

bringin' it out or do I come in?" He half turned for her approval, doubling over in his glee.

Dobey never saw where Mitch came from. One minute he was nowhere, the next he held the boy's neck tight from behind with one arm while the other hand pressed the long murderous blade across his throat. The young boy's mouth hung open in a silent, stupid howl.

This frozen scene would live in Dobey's mind forever—the girl, the music, the well, the clasped figures in the moonlight, and the little dancing flares off the blue steel blade.

Then he heard Mitch whispering, close behind the boy's right ear, whispering his intent in words that sickened Dobey and sent him crashing and fumbling for the door. For a moment the door held, stuck, then he wrenched it open viciously, hearing something crash to the floor behind him as he shouted from the doorway, "Boy! Stop that! You hear me, boy?"

He stared past the victim's dumb, locked face without seeing it as the face behind it lifted and looked at Dobey with flat colorless eyes. Dobey looked into something he had never seen before: he would never feel such fear again. Breath rattled in his throat, and still the straining arm did not relax. The young boy's legs began to sag.

"Put that thing away, I say!" Dobey roared, hand inside his boot, gripping the gun until he thought his knuckles would split.

Gently, gracefully, in slow motion, the figures before him parted, one to sink gagging to his knees in the sand as the other stepped away, letting his arm fall woodenly to his side.

"You there!" Dobey rasped to the boy at Mitch's feet, "you get out of here! Now!"

Without looking up, the boy scuttled crablike across the sand to the girl, and they both raced wildly to the car. Mitch's head turned toward them as the motor started, and he seemed to watch with interest while the wheels churned furiously in the sand before taking hold. They both watched it careen away into the dark.

Mitch stood with both hands clenched at his sides, panting, the knife winking in the light. Dobey waited, hand clawed around the gun. At last the boy turned puzzled eyes.

"He was going to—" he began in a high tight voice.

"I thank you for protecting me, boy," Dobey interrupted harshly, "but I could have handled it myself."

Mitch took several deep shuddering breaths, then sighed as he

bent to sheath the knife inside his boot. He grinned slyly at this, a ghost of the old. "See? You're not the only one. I could have—you know—any time I wanted."

Dobey's clothes were too tight across his chest. "You got to go," he said.

Mitch smiled, wider, returning to his old self. "But—"

"Yes. They'll be coming."

Mitch looked out toward the highway. "You think so?"

"I know so. Soon's it's light."

"Maybe we can hold them off."

"No. Cain't be that way."

He watched it happen, the control take over, the realization come.

"I guess you're right," Mitch said quietly. He turned toward the truck.

"Wait," Dobey said, reaching back inside. "Take this."

Wordlessly the boy accepted the razor and walked away. When he returned to the well and laid his pack alongside, the beard and long hair were gone, the face was smooth and pleasant and young in the moonlight. He came slowly across the sand and handed Dobey his radio.

"I fixed it." Then he unslung his guitar and laid it gently in Dobey's lap. "This is for you." Dobey made a short choked sound. "No, I want you to have it. To play 'Red River Valley.'"

The old man held out a paper bag. "Here. They's enough food to last a day or so."

"Thank you. Dobey, I've got to have some money."

"I ain't got much, but you're welcome to it all."

Mitch took it and stood gazing down at the old man. "When I get to those redwoods, I'm going to send you a picture." Dobey nodded.

At the well Mitch turned back once more. "I may not make it."

"I know."

He watched him walk away until, even with the glasses, he was just a speck in the distance, facing away finally into the scrub and mesquite and sand.

When the sheriff's car and two state-patrol cars squealed into the lane with the first light of day, Dobey was still sitting on the porch, hands resting lightly on the guitar. The sheriff pulled up at a distance and stuck his red face out of his car door.

"Dobey? You all right?"

At the old man's nod they all came dusting in. The sheriff jumped out.

"Hell, what's going on out here? Ralph Becker's boy come in scared green. Is he gone?"

Dobey nodded, fingers moving silently over the strings.

"Which way?"

"West," Dobey said after a while.

The sheriff fumbled through his pockets and shoved a picture at Dobey. "This him?" Dobey looked and nodded slowly.

"It's him!" The sheriff yelled, and the two patrol cars roared to life. "Get some 'copters in the air!" he shouted as the cars wheeled out and sped off up the lane. Dobey watched the cars out of sight.

"My God, Dobey, what happened?" The sheriff lumbered to the well and pulled up the bucket. He rinsed out his mouth and spat on the ground. "You sure you're okay?"

"You see me," Dobey said.

"Well, you're a lucky one." He sank down heavily beside Dobey on the porch. "You know what that kid done? Killed his own folks out in Massachusetts, one fella in a gas station in Illinois, a fella that picked him up somewhere in Kansas, and we found another'n about ten miles up the road here—the car hid in some brush, fella still in the trunk. And them's just the ones we know about! Looks like he drove the cars until they run out of gas, then ditched 'em. Hell, it's been all over the radio and TV!"

"My radio's been busted."

"Has he got a gun?"

"No," Dobey said slowly. "He's got no use for guns."

"See? This boy's a nut! What you suppose would make a fella do something like that? Well, no matter, we'll get him now. He ain't going to get away." Dobey said nothing.

"Listen, Dobey," the sheriff went on after an uncomfortable sidelong look, "this thing's got the folks in town shook up. I know you ain't going to like this, but the county's decided we just can't let you live out here like this no more. My God, man, you're lucky you ain't cut up in little pieces somewhere!" He waited while Dobey went on fingering the guitar.

"So we're going to have to move you out. Don't give me no trouble, Dobey, this time we're gonna do it. We'll find you some nice little room in town or maybe down at the Old Soldiers Home. After this thing we just can't have you on our conscience no more. It's for your own good. Dobey, you hearing me?"

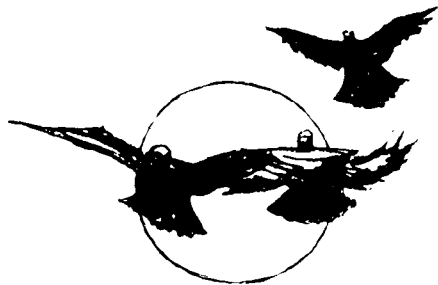
"I hear."

"All right." He rose, dusting off his hat against his thigh. "Hate

to do it, hope you know it, Dobey. You get your things together and we'll be out in the morning to take you in. You'll be all right till then. Don't worry none about that boy comin' back—dead or alive, we'll have him taken care of by nightfall." He waved cheerfully as he pulled away.

The sun climbed high in the hot white sky. A car slid by on the highway, melting quickly into shimmering waves of heat. Dobey squinted into the day.

Finally he reached down inside his boot, lifted out the long hunting knife. Carefully steadying the guitar against his lap, he cut each string in two, one by one by one.



DETECTIVERSE

BUM STEER

by SJAAN CLERC

A buffalo thief with a price on
His head for a rap he'd served twice on
To the judge did exclaim
In defense of his game:
"One man's meat is another man's bison."

© 1979 by Sjaan Clerc.

a **NEW** short story by

BARBARA WILLIAMSON

Barbara Williamson's "The Toy Killer" is her third story in EQMM. It is remarkable in its imagery and concept, and you won't forget the story, we promise you, for a long time. Readers' reports contained words like "vivid" and "frightening" and "chilling" and "grim" . . .

THE TOY KILLER

by **BARBARA WILLIAMSON**

They often passed the toy shop on their Sunday walks and once there, they paused to let the boy look in the window.

This sometimes brought smiles from others on the street. Everyone knew them, of course.

They were the LaSalles—Robert and Eva and their small son, Bobby. Their name was emblazoned on the town bank and on the cluster of mills across the river. Without the LaSalles, past and present, there would be no town.

They were remarkably alike, slender and dark-haired with the finely boned faces of a class no one believed existed any more—the high-born.

The man and his son were dark-eyed and would have looked comfortable with falcons on their wrists. Eva had a gentler look, something that spoke of white violets and music on a harpsichord. Her eyes were gray, or perhaps silver, startlingly light beneath thick black lashes.

They lived quietly in the largest house on the oldest street in town.

Many people thought they had everything.

They didn't.

© 1979 by Barbara Williamson.

Bobby put both gloved hands flat against the plate glass while his eyes darted over the display inside.

They quickly came to rest on a column of small soldiers in front of a miniature castle. The soldiers were resplendent in scarlet tunics and tall furred hats. Some had gold braid on their shoulders and they carried silver rifles. One held a drum in his tiny hands.

Bobby could almost hear the drum. He thought of all the wonderful battles the soldiers would fight and win. All the parades and marches. The drum sound grew in his ears.

"I want them," he said, pointing.

His mother put her hand on his head, lightly stroking his hair. She had a sweet mouth, as soft and vulnerable as her son's.

"Perhaps for Christmas. It's not long, you know."

Already the wind held the gray promise of snow. Above the street the sky filled and waited.

Bobby did not take his eyes from the soldiers. He could see their small proud faces. One had a mustache. Another, a golden beard. He was fiercely beautiful.

"I want them now, please," he said.

He could feel them in his hands. His fingers hurt for the touch of them.

Above his head the eyes of his parents met and held, but they did not speak of the clown. The mutilated clown.

Bobby reached out a hand to each of them and turned his face upward.

The sky drew closer.

"They want *me*," he said.

Behind the glass the soldiers waited, mute and splendid.

The snow began just before dark. Eva opened the curtains to let the blue-white twilight flow into the room. Robert laid a fire and Bobby brought the soldiers out of their box and placed them on the carpet, one by one, watching the light of the flames flash on their epaulets and rifles.

He placed the one with the golden beard in front of all the others. Then he looked up at his mother and father.

"I love them," he said. "I truly love them."

When morning came, snow lay around the house in great swirling drifts, and the trees were etched in the glitter of ice.

The fire was dead. The curtains were open and the brittle sun fell like a sheet of glass across the bodies of the soldiers.

They lay, four to a row, as if awaiting the formal burial which was their due. Their arms had been twisted to their backs and tied with string.

Nearby their severed heads looked up into the sun.

In the days that followed, Robert heard himself saying things like "Children go through phases, you know," and "It won't happen again. He knows there won't be any toys for Christmas if it does," and worst of all, "We have to be *firm*. That's the answer."

He felt blustering and foolish, but it seemed the only defense against the images that kept swimming in his mind. The decapitated soldiers and before them, the clown puppet strewn in pieces on the stairs like a bloodless murder victim, and the most chilling vision of all—his small son walking the dark house with a scissors poised in his hand.

So Robert went on repeating his platitudes like a catechism they both must memorize.

Eva said little. But her pale valentine face looked thinner and her eyes were rain-dark, darker than Robert had ever seen them.

She was restless at night and once Robert woke to find her returning to the bedroom, chilled and shaking. He held her until she was warm again.

"It's all right," she told him. "He's asleep."

"What did you hear?"

"I don't know . . . But it's all right." Her hands tightened suddenly around his neck. "It is all right, isn't it?"

He stroked her hair. "Of course it is," he said. "It won't happen again. He's learned his lesson."

An icy moon was rising in the sky and shadows played on the bedroom wall like bones tossed on the ground helter-skelter.

Just when he thought she was sleep, he heard her whisper, her breath soft against his neck.

"He cried for them. The soldiers and the clown."

"I know," Robert said. He didn't like to think of Bobby's white face wet with tears. "He was sorry he'd done it."

"No," she said. "No. I think . . . Robert, I think he doesn't *remember*."

As Christmas drew near, the weather turned unseasonably warm. The snow puddled and dripped. The streets were brown slush.

"What a shame," everyone said as they hung their wreaths and

wrapped their gifts and baked cookies shaped like stars.

Robert and Eva shopped for toys, saying to each other the things they always said.

"Will he like this?"

"It may be too complicated."

"No. Not for Bobby."

"But is it *safe*, do you think?"

They could make no decisions. Since the incident of the soldiers, Bobby had been subdued and withdrawn, working his puzzles quietly and turning the pages of books as if he weren't really seeing them. He had not mentioned Christmas or asked for any presents.

"What should we do?" they asked each other and had no answer.

Around town, Christmas trees went up, glittering through windows, throwing the glow of their many-colored lights across the shrinking patches of snow.

Carolers came and young voices filled the street with old songs. Eva gave them chocolate and cookies and from the stairs Bobby watched with dark and mournful eyes.

The next morning he refused his breakfast and Robert and Eva looked at each other fearfully. Then Robert laid aside his napkin and put his large hand over his son's small one.

"What is it, Bobby? Tell us what's wrong."

Bobby stopped playing with his spoon and looked up. "I'm a bad boy. You told me."

Robert blinked, glanced at Eva, and then back at Bobby. He took the child's hand between both of his.

"Because of the soldiers, yes. But that's all over, Bobby. You've been a very *good* boy since then and we're proud of you."

Bobby swallowed and his eyes moistened suddenly. In a small voice he said, "Will I have Christmas?"

Robert's grin spread like the sun. He pushed back his chair and scooped Bobby up in his arms, holding him high.

"Of course you'll have Christmas! Is that what's the matter? You'll have the biggest Christmas you ever had!"

Bobby began to laugh as his father jiggled him up and down.

"I will? I really, really will? With lots and lots of toys?"

Robert hugged him and swung him around and then he laughed, too. "Lots and lots of toys!" he said. "I promise!"

Eva watched. Her heart was pattering coldly. Over and over, above the laughter, she heard the words. *Lots of toys. Lots and lots of toys.*

She shivered.

On Christmas Eve the rain came, steady and warm and slow. Inside the house the LaSalles listened.

There were candles in all the windows and on the tables, crystal bowls filled with pine and holly. A great tree stood in the room with the fire, and mounds of packages, gold and red and green, spilled from beneath its branches.

Upstairs Bobby was asleep.

Eva and Robert sat by the fire. Eva was wearing a white robe trimmed with dark fur. A little silver locket gleamed on her throat. Robert thought her more beautiful than he had ever seen her and he was content to watch her over the edge of his book while they waited together for the night to grow old.

She was unaware of his scrutiny. She was busy with her needle, *embroidering their initials—an intricate entwined E and R—on the new linens*. The thread was the color of pewter and it passed through her fingers like a strand of web, shining dully in the firelight. She never seemed to tire of this chosen task.

Just after midnight Robert rose from his chair and went to her. "Merry Christmas," he said and kissed her soft mouth.

She put the embroidery aside.

"It's time, isn't it?"

"Yes."

He took her hands and lifted her to her feet. She felt light, reminding him of a bird he'd once held in his hand, a thing so delicate he had held his breath.

"Now," he said, "I become a jolly red myth and you, madam, have been appointed my helper."

He felt expansive and warm and deeply grateful. His son, a good-bad child like every other, was deep in sleep, his wife was here safe in his arms, and it was Christmas.

They brought the toys from their hiding places and put them under the tree.

There was a train, sleek and fast, with curve upon curve of shining track. There were games and puzzles and books filled with knights and explorers and animals with valorous hearts. There was a Spanish galleon in full sail and a family of dinosaurs with wicked smiles.

And there was a lion. A great plush lion, darkly gold, with a magnificent mane and eyes like jade. Eva held it for a moment, looking into its face, before she set it beneath the tree.

When her hands were empty at last, they began to tremble ever so slightly.

Robert came to her. "It's all right," he said. "It's all *right*."

She looked up at him. "I know," she said.

She let him lead her out of the room. As they climbed the stairs, arm in arm, she wondered what her son was dreaming.

Far into the night she woke and lay very still, listening.

The rain had stopped and the only sound in the room was her husband's quiet breathing.

But she knew what she had heard.

She slipped from under the covers, pausing only to look down at Robert's sleeping form. As always, she felt the need to touch him, to feel his warm flesh beneath her fingers, making him somehow a part of herself.

But she turned away.

The house was warm and she did not bother with robe or slippers. Nor did she feel the need for a light. All the turnings of the house were familiar to her.

Her breath was coming quickly as she went through the door and out into the hall. Her hand found the newel post, her feet, the stairs. Already she could see the fairy glow from the Christmas tree melting the darkness of the hall below.

She paused at the foot of the stairs, listening again. There was no sound.

She moved to the door of the room.

The tree sparkled and glittered. Shadows banked the corners of the room and lay in elongated puddles across the floor.

"Bobby," she said softly, so as not to frighten him.

He turned. He was holding the lion tightly in his arms. She could see only half of his face in the light from the tree.

She knew that she must be careful and very loving.

She went to him.

He looked up at her, his eyes enormous. He clutched the lion to his chest. "I love him," he said. "I truly love him."

Eva touched his hair and smiled.

"I know you do," she said. "Would you like to take him back to bed with you?"

Bobby's hands tightened on the lion. "Yes," he said. "He's my friend. He truly is."

"Come along then." Eva gently urged him away from the tree.

"When it's morning you can come down and play with the other toys. They'll be waiting for you."

They went up the dark stairs together, their bare feet making no sound on the carpet.

A night-light burned in Bobby's room, guiding them to the bed. He crawled beneath the covers, dragging the lion with him. Eva tucked the blanket around him.

"There," she said and gave him a light kiss on his forehead. "I'll stay with you until you're asleep again."

Bobby closed his eyes, then opened them again. His fingers were moving in the lion's luxurious ruff. "I won't hurt him," he said.

"I know you won't," Eva said. "Now go back to sleep."

She sat beside him for what seemed a long time. Her muscles grew stiff and she shivered now and then in her thin nightgown, but she didn't move from the bed until she saw that her son was sleeping once more. His hands had loosed their hold on the lion and she was able to draw it away from him slowly and pull the covers up to his chin.

Holding the lion in the crook of her arm, she went to the windows and adjusted the curtains so the early light would not come in too soon. Outside, the night dripped and was milky with fog.

She was cold now, but she had no time to think of that. The familiar excitement was rising inside her.

She sat down in the small chair by the windows and held the lion between her knees. She took both hands, and using her nails, ripped the jade eyes from their sockets.

And then she smiled into the blind, slaughtered face.

"Q"

ELLERY QUEEN'S MYSTERY NEWSLETTER

CRIME DOSSIER

by OTTO PENZLER

IMPOSSIBLE: If there is any small sub-genre of detective fiction which fascinates a universal audience it is probably the locked-room murder and its larger umbrella, the impossible crime.

The first name associated with these diabolically twisted plots is John Dickson Carr/Carter Dickson, but there have been several other masters of the form, including Clayton Rawson, Ellery Queen, Nigel Morland, Edward D. Hoch, and Anthony Boucher. An extraordinary achievement—the reference equivalent of an impossible murder—is Robert Adey's *Locked Room Murders*, an annotated bibliography of 1,280 entries. Each listing provides the author, title, publisher (both U.S. and English in most cases), date of original publication, and title variants. For short stories, it also lists the magazine publication together with the first book appearance.

All entries have the name of the detective (or crook) and—serendipity!—a brief description of the

problem. In the back of the book, well segregated to avoid the possibility of revealing an ending, are the solutions of the impossible crimes and locked-room puzzles described in the front. If you ever suspected for an instant that the creativity of mystery writers had limitations, a random sampling of this invaluable reference book will instantly dispel the notion. *Locked Room Murders* was published in England by Ferret Fantasy Ltd., 27 Beechcroft Road, Upper Tooting, London SW17 7BX, England. The announced price was \$20.00, but several cost increases have caused the probability of a price hike. It would be best to write to inquire about the price before sending money, but the book had a limited run and it would be wise to reserve a copy before it goes out of print.

The same publisher has also produced a collection of turn-of-the-century Sherlock Holmes parodies culled from rare British magazines. *The Affair of the Lost Compression and Other Stories* is a slim paperback limited to 500

copies, priced at \$5.00. Another of its publications is *At the Mountains of Murkiness and Other Parodies* (\$6.00), a paperbound compendium with burlesques of Arthur Conan Doyle, H. P. Love-

craft, Fergus Hume, and others. Also of interest to mystery fans is *From a Surgeon's Diary* (\$6.00) by Clifford Ashdown, the collaborative pseudonym of R. Austin Freeman and Clifford Ashdown.

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BLOODY VISIONS

by **CHRIS STEINBRUNNER**

Running like a strong thread through the Fall's vapid television lineup is the return of the crime-and-cop show—only wearing a comedy mask. In the last few years media watchdogs have forced off the strong, bullets-are-flying police and private-eye shows—only to have them turn up disguised behind light-comedy suspense formats. Which would be all to the good if only the programs were better.

The most promising of the new shows, in fact, was snatched from the Fall schedule for further work! *Hart in San Francisco* (among the things being retooled is the title, for now the show is to be called *Nobody's Perfect*) chronicles the American assignments of Inspector Roger Hart, a fish out of water loaned to the San Francisco Police Department as part of an exchange program with Scotland Yard.

He does not assimilate very well. As played by the celebrated British actor Ron Moody (who was Fagin in the musical, *Oliver Twist*), Hart is elegant, urbane,

full of Old World gallantry—in extreme contrast to his New World counterparts on the police squad. Hart even reads — Sherlock Holmes, for instance, though only to find flaws in Holmes's logic and procedure. He is also clumsy. So clumsy, in fact, he would make Inspector Clouseau seem as steady as a bomb-squad leader in comparison. Indeed, he is the Inspector's British twin: objects in his immediate vicinity tend to tip over, fall apart, spill, run dry, unravel, or burst into flame. However, he has a brain, and is not hampered unduly in solving unusual cases with style and daring. (He also makes good use of the aid offered by a bright, pretty woman detective played by the spirited Cassie Yates.) *Nobody's Perfect* should be perfect—ABC hopes—by the time it gets to TV this Spring.

It may make programming sense somewhere but to mystery fans it seems like sheer idiocy to schedule three genre shows against one another on Saturday nights. *Hart to Hart* on ABC is fluff

fantasy: an engaging, super-rich married couple (Robert Wagner, Stefanie Powers) elegantly dabbling in mysteries, much like Nick and Nora and Pam and Jerry before them. Only the cash flow is wilder. The Hart duo skips about in their own private jet, plays cards with oil sheiks (an embarrassing interlude!), all in a manner both ostentatious and gross. Although their charm, sophisticated banter, and even little pet dog are supposed to remind you of the Charleses, the Thin Man sure did it better.

Meanwhile, over at NBC, Robert Conrad is a James Bond clone in *A Man Called Sloane*, aided by sexy-voiced Effie—no, not a descendant of the beloved Effie of the Sam Spade radio adventures, but in these changing times merely an EFI Series 3000 computer. James Earl Jones as Detective Captain *Paris* of the Los Angeles Police Department at CBS, both teaching criminology and cracking cases, is in contrast refreshingly real. But to force us to choose among this trio of shows is frustrating.

The most realistic of the police shows is *Eischied* (NBC), with Joe Don Baker as a Southern cop who becomes New York City's Chief of Detectives and is very gritty indeed. As well, we can frolic at

Detective School (ABC), soar in the helicopters of the L. A. sheriff's search - and - rescue teams (*240-Robert*, ABC), or peer over transoms with an Atlantic City hotel detective and his young son, the charming duo of *Big Shamus*, *Little Shamus* (CBS), a caper comedy that is a small delight. Happy watching!

One of the most enduring images associated with Britain is the bobby, the reassuring local policeman. Recently, London's Metropolitan Police Force celebrated its 150th birthday with an exhibit at the famed London Wall Museum, where one could step through a police box as though through a time machine into the past—displays and reconstructions showing how the breakdown of law and order in the Eighteenth Century gave birth to the Bow Street Runners evolving into the "New Police." Exhibits showing early crime detection, how Scotland Yard got its name (actually from a vacant lot behind Sir Robert Peel's first headquarters), the rise of motorized police—the Flying Squad—and radio communications, all serve as a reminder how many thrills, from Edgar Wallace to John Creasey, from Commander Gideon to Police Constable 49, the British police have contributed to our reading!

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"Q"

INTERVIEW: MARY HIGGINS CLARK (1)

Two of the most popular suspense novels of recent years have been *Where Are the Children?* and *A Stranger Is Watching*, both by Mary Higgins Clark. Her third mystery novel gives every indication of being even more successful and should chill the bones of her millions of fans when it is published by Simon and Schuster in the Spring.

EQMM: Your first two mysteries are "children in jeopardy" stories. Do you ever think about that in your personal life?

CLARK: Yes, I'm an Irish worrywart about children.

EQMM: Does that greatly influence the type of book you prefer to write?

CLARK: There is a "nobody hates a baby" concept that works effectively in fiction. If you rob a bank, there is often a bit of "I hope he gets away with it" thought involved—providing that he doesn't shoot a guard or do something else bad. But if you kidnap a child, everyone becomes a vigilante. The whole world is against the kidnaper. I believe in writing about emotional issues, and everyone immediately places his own child, or grandchild, or favorite niece or nephew, or the little kid down the block, in the same situation.

EQMM: What is your reaction to the large number of books which appear to have been written, designed, and published as direct

pilferages of your own?

CLARK: Imitation is the sincerest form of flattery. But it's a reality of life. A dress designer creates something good and Seventh Avenue has racks of it three weeks later. I do get angry as a consumer. When the title is so close to something successful, and the cover design is almost indistinguishable from the first one, I think it's a black eye for the publishing industry. Similar titles may be unavoidable, but to copy the lettering and the artwork is, I think, a serious mistake. It is undignified. In the long run, a publisher who habitually does this will not profit because of the few thousand extra sales they might get just because somebody picked up the wrong book.

EQMM: Did you ever expect the sort of phenomenal success you've had? Or is that an impossible question?

CLARK: I always knew I'd make it as a writer—which is a big part of being a writer. You have to have that absolute sense of: no matter what, no matter how many rejection slips, no matter how long it takes, you're going to succeed. On the other hand, there are people who feel that way who will not listen to their editors or their agents, who will never change a word. They say, "But this is the way it really happened," which has nothing to do with it, of course. Years ago, Jean Kerr was

asked to define a writer, and she said, "Anyone who makes twenty thousand dollars a year writing." What she was saying is that a writer writes to be read. If you don't, you have no more right to call yourself a writer than someone who acts in front of a mirror has the right to call himself an actor.

EQMM: Do you mind talking about your books before they are

written? Can you say something about the next one?

CLARK: When someone asks me about a book in progress . . . ten minutes later, when their eyes start to glaze, I realize it's time to stop talking.

(Mary Higgins Clark will talk about her next book in the conclusion of this interview, in the next issue.)

THE JURY BOX

by **JON L. BREEN**

Leo Bruce, the mystery-writing pseudonym of Rupert Croft-Cooke, may seem a name out of the distant past to American readers.

His best-known book, the delightful and cleverly constructed satire, *Case for Three Detectives* (1937), introduced Sergeant Beef, whose down-to-earth sleuthing enabled him to outscore parody versions of Hercule Poirot, Father Brown, and Lord Peter Wimsey. In more recent years, Bruce has recorded the exploits of wealthy schoolmaster-detective Carolus Deene in a long series of novels, few of which have been published in the United States. Now, happily, it seems that condition will be remedied, beginning with a 1964 case.

*** Leo Bruce: *Death in Albert Park*, Scribners, \$8.95. The series of stabbings in a shabby subur-

ban community are reputedly the work of a Jack the Ripper-type maniac, but Deene chooses to investigate them as individual crimes. Like Dr. Fell and Gervase Fen, Deene belongs to the self-consciously fictitious school of detectives, and Bruce adds such artificial touches as the whimsical names of some of the series regulars (Priggle and Stick). The characters, however, prove remarkably lifelike, and Bruce plays so fair with his readers that many will probably come to the same inevitable and satisfying solution Deene does.

**** Stephen King: *The Dead Zone*, Viking, \$11.95. This completely irresistible piece of pure story-telling, a long look at what the life of a genuine psychic must be like, leaves no doubt why supernatural specialist King hits the best-seller lists with such

regularity. The detective-story aspect is concentrated in the middle part of the book, and the final section is not quite up to what has gone before, but interest never flags.

*** Ellis Peters: *Rainbow's End*, Morrow, \$8.95. When the new choirmaster, a rich but hated outsider, falls to his death from the tower of the village church, George Felse investigates. A precocious and foolhardy schoolboy adventurer is the most interesting character. It's Peters' usual literate, pleasant job, though the killer is too minor a character for full impact and the wind-up delivers more action and suspense than detection.

*** David Snell: *Lights, Camera ... Murder*, St. Martin's, \$9.95. An American equivalent of Simon Brett's actor-sleuth Charles Paris, Osgood Bass is younger, not quite as witty, far less cynical, probably not quite as good an actor, but just as good a detective. The film-making background is beautifully done and the characters (several human and one feline) come to life.

*** John Sladek: *Black Aura*, Walker, \$8.95. First published in Britain in 1974, this fine and funny novel of seemingly supernatural crime, the book-length debut of amateur sleuth Thackeray Phin, marked his creator as a worthy Anglo-American successor to John Dickson Carr as explicator of locked-room problems.

*** Cecily Crowe: *The Talisman*, St. Martin's, \$8.95. The account of California widow Susan Mac-

Larkie's dangerous convalescence in the Scottish highlands is a solid and substantial romantic-suspense novel, nicely written and peopled and very much in the tradition of Phyllis A. Whitney.

*** Stuart Kaminsky: *The Howard Hughes Affair*, St. Martin's, \$8.95. Aside from the titular client, Hollywood private eye Toby Peters' guest stars this time around include Basil Rathbone (whose Holmesian deductions are a little hokey), Bugsy Siegel, and Bertold Brecht. Kaminsky is skilled at picking the right nostalgic detail, and readers who share his love of the movies will find this hard to resist.

*** Lillian O'Donnell: *Fallen Star*, Putnam, \$9.95. The second book about Mici Anhalt of the New York State Crime Victims Compensation Board is a theatrical novel in both background and presentation and a very satisfying one.

** Anthony Price: *Tomorrow's Ghost*, Doubleday - Crime Club, \$8.95. Here is a Jekyll-and-Hyde of a book. The story, involving an investigation of whether Colonel Butler, up for promotion in Britain's intelligence establishment, killed his wife nine years ago, is fascinating. But Price's waffling, herky-jerky style, and some unconscionable padding nearly sink it.

** Carter Brown: *See it Again*, Sam, Belmont Tower, \$1.50. Along with Brown's usual mix of sex, wisecracks, and tough stuff, in a somewhat more somber vein than usual, the latest Rick Holman mystery offers a genuinely puzz-

zling mystery about the acid-blinding of a movie star. The plot, though, seems to come up one twist short.

**** John Drew:** *Edge of the Tightrope*, Communication Creativity (5644 La Jolla Blvd., La Jolla, CA 92037), \$7.95. Involving terrorism

and set in San Diego, this is a relentlessly unpleasant debut, brief, violent, largely humorless. The style ranges from vivid to trite, and the characters act like real people only sometimes. Drew, however, reveals a talent that bears watching.

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"Q"

AUTHOR	TITLE	PUBLISHER	RETAIL PRICE	DIS-COUNT PRICE
Baxt, George	THE NEON GRAVEYARD	St. Martin's	\$8.95	\$6.95
Bruce, Leo	DEATH IN ALBERT PARK	Scribners	8.95	6.95
Crowe, Cecily	THE TALISMAN	St. Martin's	8.95	6.95
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Estleman, Loren D.	DR. JEKYLL AND MR. HOLMES	Doubleday	8.95	6.95
Hansen, Joseph	SKINFICK	Holt, Rinehart and Winston	8.95	6.95
Kaminsky, Stuart	THE HOWARD HUGHES AFFAIR	St. Martin's	8.95	6.95
King, Stephen	THE DEAD ZONE	Viking	11.95	9.60
Kirk, Russell	LORD OF THE HOLLOW DARK	St. Martin's	10.95	8.40
Michaels, Barbara	THE WALKER IN SHADOWS	Dodd, Mead	8.95	6.95
O'Donnell, Lillian	FALLEN STAR	Putnam	9.95	7.95
Parrish, Frank	STING OF THE HONEYBEE	Dodd, Mead	7.95	6.35
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a **NEW** detective story by

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While Mr. and Mrs. Bennett were attending their upholstery class—well, Mr. Bennett was at the bar across from Burns's Upholstery Shop—the Bennetts' valuable coin collection was stolen from the bottom of the linen closet in Mrs. Bennett's room. Now, stolen coin collections are not easy to recover . . .

COINS AT LARGE

by **ERNEST SAVAGE**

“Forty thousand dollars' worth,” he said, his voice breaking in anguish. “At least that much! Mr. Train, I've been collecting coins—.”

“We've been,” his wife interjected.

“—we've been collecting coins for twenty years, and we had a fine collection, I mean a *fine* collection! We had all the half dollars minted from 1846 through 1873—*all* of them, including the New Orleans, most in fine or very fine condition and a half-dozen practically uncirculated. We—”

“Not really,” his wife said.

“Practically uncirculated, Marion! I said '*practically*.'” He wiped moisture from around his eyes and scratched an itch on his left rib cage. It was too hot in his house. He and I were seated across from each other at the dining-room table, his wife on the near end of a couch just inside the living-room arch. She was knitting. They were both about 50, he heavy, unstrung, and homely, she slim, composed, and attractive.

It was Monday evening. He'd called me last Friday. He'd said his coin collection had been stolen from his house sometime in the last six weeks—he couldn't estimate it closer than that. He'd said he

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called the cops last Monday—that is, a week ago—right after finding the coins gone, but they'd got nowhere with the case. He'd said the collection was not insured, his voice breaking with grief then as it was breaking now.

"We had the Indian Heads complete," he went on huskily. "We had every Lincoln Head, every nickel from 1913, about half the Barber dimes, every Mercury Head dime—" He was shaking his head, eyes down, mourning. "Almost all the standing Liberty quarters—I didn't have the 1919S, but that's no problem, a hundred bucks maybe—all the Washingtons—" He was almost in tears.

"You discovered them gone last Monday," I said. "When was the last time before that you knew they were here?"

"That's what gets me, Mr. Train. I haven't bought a coin in six months, but I used to take them out just to look at them, a book or two at a time. But it's been six weeks, maybe seven, since I even reached in and touched them."

"Reached in where?"

"The bottom of the linen chest in my wife's room. We've kept them there all this time, twenty-eight books of them, plus some sacks. Probably fifty thousand at today's prices, it's gotta be fifty thousand—I haven't checked prices in two years." The sweat was building under his eyes again. It must have been 85 in the room.

Mrs. Bennett put her knitting aside and stood up, looking cool, untroubled by the heat. "Mr. Train," she said, "would you like some coffee?"

Iced, I thought; but I said politely, "Yes, thank you."

She went to the kitchen and Bennett leaned forward conspiratorily. I could smell whiskey on his breath. "Train, listen," he said in a gravelly *sotto voce*. "She and I are through, we're getting divorced—or we were, anyway, until this thing happened." He laughed bitterly. "Now, probably, we can't afford it—the coins were practically everything we owned." He bent closer. "You gotta find 'em, man, you gotta!"

I leaned back in my chair and looked away from the pain in his eyes. He was bucking long odds. Stolen coins are as hard to find as diamonds in the Bay. "Maybe," I said, "you and your wife should reconcile."

"Huh? No, no way, man. We've tried that. Besides, that's how come the collection got swiped. If we hadn't—"

"Hold it," I said. "I don't see the connection."

"All right— Six months ago we went to this marriage counselor

and he told us—for his fifty bucks an hour—we oughta *do* things together, you know, outside the house, like fun and games stuff. See? So we joined this bowling-league deal, but it turns out I've got bursitis in my right shoulder and she couldn't even *drop* the ball on the right lane, let alone throw it. So then we got into this upholstery-class proposition and—"

"What upholstery-class proposition?"

"The one down at the Plaza—Burns's Upholstery is the name of the place. A fabric shop—he runs this school on the side. Eighty-five bucks per couple for a ten-week course, two nights a week, three hours a night. They start you out on an ottoman—and that's when it happened, on accounta we tried this reconciliation bit."

"What happened?"

"The coins got swiped. While we were down there at the class one night."

"I see. But you don't know which night?"

"No—I can't even guess. Five—six—seven weeks ago."

"And no sign of a burglary, no disorder?"

"Nothing we noticed."

"How'd he get in, then?"

"I don't know. The door, maybe—we probably left the door unlocked."

"And nothing else taken?"

"There's nothing else worth taking, Train."

"And you didn't even know about it until last Monday—when you did what exactly?"

"I went to get one of the books, that's all. I knew where I could buy a 1932D Washington quarter in extra-fine condition for a hundred bucks. I wanted to check the one I had against it—but it was gone, they were all gone." The heavy bags under his eyes were moist again.

"A collection that valuable, Mr. Bennett—why didn't you insure it?"

"Lord—how many times have I asked myself the same question?" He sighed ponderously. "How come? Well, the premium's too high, for one thing, and for another they want you to keep 'em in a vault somewhere, and I wanted 'em here. And for another thing—if I had 'em insured people would know I had 'em and I didn't want people to know that."

"You mean *nobody* knew you had the collection?"

"Nobody! Absolutely nobody! My son knew, but nobody else."

"Where's your son?"

"In Baltimore, three thousand miles away."

"In *jail* in Baltimore," Mrs. Bennett said. She'd come up silently behind me with the coffee on a tray. She put the tray on the table. "For the past four months, Mr. Train. Our son is a drinking man."

"It wasn't such a big thing," Bennett said.

"No, just an itty-bitty hit-and-run. Our son is a drinking man—like his father."

The phone rang in the kitchen and Bennett looked meaningfully, malevolently at his wife; but she didn't react. He got up and went in to answer it, lumbering angrily.

"And I wouldn't take Mr. Bennett's judgment that no one knew about the collection," Mrs. Bennett said, pouring coffee calmly. "Mr. Bennett talks when he drinks. All men do."

"Where does he work, Mrs. Bennett?"

"He's a printer. He works at Harrison's."

"Do you suppose anyone down there knows about the coins?"

"It wouldn't surprise me."

"That rather opens it up, doesn't it?"

"Yes. That's what the police investigator told me, too. Enjoy your coffee, Mr. Train."

I got up and took off my jacket and put it on a chair, while Mrs. Bennett went back to her knitting on the couch. The couch looked freshly upholstered and I asked her if they'd done the job at the class and she said yes, that *she'd* done the job, that Mr. Bennett had spent most of the class time across the street at a bar. Her needles were working in that flashing intricate manner that I've never understood, but have always admired.

I said, "How far is Burns's place from here?"

"About twenty minutes."

"And Mr. Bennett would sometimes be gone from class for how long?"

"A couple of hours, on the average. But if you're thinking what I think you're thinking, Mr. Train, I'd dismiss the thought. Mr. Bennett is not that good an actor. His misery is real."

"And yours—?"

"Equally real—but less noisy. I've had to suffer a great number of things in silence in my life." Her fingers were flying.

I felt better with my jacket off. I sat down and sipped the coffee, which was good and strong. "Mr. Bennett tells me," I said, "that a divorce is in the offing."

"A divorce between us has been in the offing since a week after the nuptials."

"He suggests this loss might cancel it."

"No, it won't. Nothing will now. I've given the matter considerable thought, Mr. Train, and I'm forced to the rather bizarre conclusion that it was the coins that kept us together. Surely there was nothing else, and with them gone—I intend to proceed at once."

"Do you work, Mrs. Bennett?"

"Not at the moment. But I have most of my life. In fact, the coins represented my labors as much as Harold's."

"Do you have a man friend?"

The eyes came up for the first time, then down again quickly. "I have several men friends, Mr. Train. No one special." The fingers didn't miss a beat.

"And Mr. Bennett—?"

"A lady friend? I seriously doubt it. He is a singularly unattractive man." Silence fell between us for a moment, then she said unexpectedly, "I understand you charge two hundred dollars a day."

"That's correct."

"It seems an enormous amount of money."

"As compared to what?"

"Yes." She smiled briefly. "I rather thought you'd say that. As compared to fifty thousand, for instance."

"Are they really worth that?"

"At least. Harold has no head for figures. I do. I was a bookkeeper. At today's prices they're worth that and more." Her eyes darted up again. "Mr. Train, do you always succeed in your quests?"

"Not always."

"In which case, I presume, the client is not required to pay."

"When the medical profession functions on that basis, Mrs. Bennett, perhaps I will too."

She grinned. "Fat chance, huh?"

"Fat chance," I said, smiling back at her. She was as singularly attractive as he was not, and it was hard to fathom their marriage. The dark stains under his fingernails were explained by his work, but the general unkemptness of the man wasn't. Her needles were flying again. She was working on what appeared to be an afghan, the finished bulk of it spreading across her lap and onto the cushions of the couch. The beading around the cushions and arms and back of the couch was neat, professional-looking. I could imagine her doing it, but not him. They seemed to have nothing in common; so

what—beside the coins—had kept them together? "Mrs. Bennett," I said, "are you a Catholic?"

She looked up again. "We were until a few months ago. I've given up the church. Harold—" She shrugged and her hands came to rest in her lap. "That was an astute question, Mr. Train. I hope you're as clever at finding our collection."

"Maybe you can help," I said. "Who took it, any idea? Assuming your husband didn't."

"Yes. Someone he blabbed to while drinking."

"Someone in the bar across from Burns's? Or just any bar?"

"Across from Burns's, I would think. Whoever he is, he'd have known the house was empty during those three hours. It wouldn't have been difficult to find our address."

"But would Harold have told him the coins were at the bottom of the linen chest?"

"That isn't as unlikely as it seems," she said thoughtfully. "Particularly since nothing else was disturbed. Yes, I believe he told someone exactly that. In that bar."

"Which makes finding him a long shot, doesn't it?"

"Yes. Hardly worth the cost of looking—as I told Harold."

"So with the coins presumably gone," I said, "what's left to split between you?"

"Enough for my needs, Mr. Train. The house is worth considerable. I will take the furniture, he can have the car. I will go back to work, of course."

"Not remarry?"

"That," she said, "is none of your business."

Meaning, I thought, yes. As attractive as she was, she'd have a pick. And had probably made it already. An interesting woman.

Bennett returned then, entering the dining room quickly, as though to catch a word or two. His shirt was sweat-stained under the arms. He sat facing me again and said suspiciously, "Well—?" He didn't tell her who'd called, and she didn't ask. Communication between them was dead.

"Well nothing," I said. "We've been waiting. What have the police reported so far?"

"Not a damn thing! Which is what I expected. Which is why I called you."

"They've been checking coin dealers?"

"That's what they said, but my guess is they've round-filed it."

"You're wrong, Bennett, they've been doing their job. Unless you

told them something you haven't told me."

"Well, I haven't," he said, almost snarling it.

I got up and put on my jacket and Bennett pushed heavily to his feet. I thanked Mrs. Bennett for the coffee and headed for the door, trailed by him. Outside, he said, "What're you gonna do, Train?"

"Go look for your collection."

"Where? You got an idea?"

"I do," I said, and walked across his raggedy front lawn to my car parked in the drive. . .

Burns's Upholstery Shop was still open at eight thirty. I walked in the front door, a bell ringing overhead, and then through a forest of upright bolts of upholstery fabric to a lighted door that led to the workroom in the rear, a hive of activity under banks of fluorescent lights. A slender middle-aged man wearing a loose cerise shirt tied in the front at the waist and green velveteen pants met me at the door. He'd heard the bell.

"Mr. Burns?"

"Yes, sir," he said with a nice smile. "What can I do for you?"

I told him who I was and handed him a card to verify and the smile vanished. Behind him a dozen or so people were working at benches on which were arranged a number of ottomans in various stages of dress and undress. They start on ottomans, Bennett had said; a new class. I liked the room—it had a warm purposeful atmosphere.

I told him I was here on behalf of Mr. and Mrs. Bennett, recent students of his, and he made a face. "She was nice," he said, "but *he* was a boor."

"They did a couch together, I understand."

"*She* did a couch, she and Mr. Coleman. *He* did nothing but smell up the place and then go across the street and get drunk. I have never—"

"Get drunk, Mr. Burns?"

"Well, perhaps I exaggerate. He'd come back at ten, though, quite happy with himself. I have never—"

"Was he gone most of the time?"

"After the first two or three classes, yes, leaving poor Mrs. Bennett alone. I try to have couples because the work goes better with four hands, but—" He stopped, catching up with himself. "Is there some kind of trouble, Mr. Train?"

"There is. They had something of value stolen from their house—presumably while they were here."

"Oh, dear! I'm sorry to hear that, particularly for her."

"You were telling me you try to have couples—"

"Yes, because the work goes better with two and the selection of fabric is agreed on by *both*."

"I get your point. No singles?"

"Well, occasionally—some people *do* live alone, you know, but normally—"

"How about Mr. Coleman? Was he a single? No wife?"

"Well, no *apparent* wife, Mr. Train. And a very nice gentleman, indeed."

"How old, would you say?"

"Your age, perhaps." He smiled again. "Forty-five, fifty—thereabouts."

"I'm younger than I look," I said. "It's the work. And Mr. Coleman and Mrs. Bennett got along well, I take it?"

"Famously! And I was pleased as punch for her. Her couch came out beautifully as a result, *both* their couches did. And their ottomans, too. We start them on ottomans." He waved a graceful hand at the room.

"So I'm told. This is a new class, then?"

"Yes. The third night. I have a class Monday and Wednesday, and a class Tuesday and Thursday. Plus, of course, the store."

"It keeps you busy."

"I like being busy, Mr. Train." His tone was revealing. "I *must* keep busy."

"And the Bennetts' class ended when—a week and a half ago?"

"Yes. Exactly."

I liked him. He was making a life for himself. Against odds. "An important question," I said. "Do you think anything of a romantic nature developed between Mrs. Bennett and Coleman?"

"Ah—I was afraid you'd ask me that. It happens here sometimes. But how can one tell? Nothing overt, of course, but the work is intimate, a touching of hands, heads together. You must at least be friends."

"And over a ten-week period a friendship can grow, can't it."

"In less time than that, Mr. Train."

"Thanks," I said. "If ever I get the time I'll join one of your classes. I've got a Laz-E-Boy that needs help desperately."

"It would be my pleasure," he said, and we shook hands. Firmly.

I stood outside for a while and looked across the street at Mike's

Rendezvous, a narrow store-front bar with a neon cocktail sign glowing unenticingly behind a black-painted window. A neighborhood haven for the losing and the lost. It was Bennett's kind of place.

He could easily have driven home from here one night, hidden the coin books in the car—which he knew would be his after the split—and then gone to Mike's for a few quick snorts to build the proper tonality of breath before returning to class. I did not necessarily buy his wife's judgment that he wasn't guileful enough to act the role he was playing—if it was a role. They'd been locked into a religiously insoluble marriage for a long, long time, with only hate between them; and hate, as a basis of guile, has no peer.

Or *she* could have brought the coin books down here, a few at a time, hidden in her purse, and sewn them into the couch she and Coleman had built—the couch that would be hers in the divvy of the Bennetts' goods. But that would take Coleman's complicity, and perhaps a compact of trust and love between them, a future marriage—which, she had said, was none of my business. *Everything* is my business, lady, once you call me in. But *she* hadn't called me in, her husband had.

I sighed. It was after ten. I could be home easily in time for the eleven o'clock horror story, but I went across the street to Mike's as though magnetized. There was something in there I wanted to discover—the bottom of a glass of Scotch.

I did it twice. Bad as it was, it was better than the news ever is.

The jackhammers wakened me. I can sleep through the roar of traffic, the wail of sirens, even gunshots, but introduce a new noise into my world and I'm up like a thief. They were still at it out there on Van Ness, tearing up the street. Last week they'd found a couple of Indian arrowheads in the endless hole they're digging, and the work stopped for a while in respectful awe. Ohlone arrowheads—relics of a long dead tribe and a long gone day. We sense that it may have been better than ours—

What wakened an Ohlone brave 200 years ago, I wondered, lying there. The silent rise of the sun over the eastern hills, where Oakland is now? The song of a bird?

Then the brave went fishing and hunting, his work. His Bay was full of salmon and trout and shellfish, chemically pure; his hills were thick with herds of antelope and deer—and when he killed one for food, he offered up a prayer for its soul; an apology. A caring man.

If affluence is defined as plenty for every member of a society, then the Ohlones were more affluent than we are. They had no poor. But they lived on this once beautiful peninsula without owning it, without owning a thing. No deeds, no tract maps, no rights of way. No coins. Just the world as they found it, each one owning it all; each one rich.

The wheel has turned full circle, I thought in the hour's gloom: the Savage is noble again—because we aren't. He learned from us, and died. We haven't learned from him, and are dying—

It is no way to start your day, counting such beads. I got up and made strong coffee, the Bennetts on my mind.

Mrs. Bennett opened the door for me at five o'clock. Harold wasn't home yet, she said; but I'd planned it that way. The case, of course, was solved. It was a matter now of drawing as little blood as possible—and the half hour I'd spent with Burns a while ago would help reduce the flow. I hoped.

She let me in and I didn't wait this time, I took off my jacket at once. It must have been 90 in the place, a stupefying heat, the temperature set for her, not for him or any other normal person; her smooth brow was dry as dust. Her blood must be ice-water by now, turned cold through the years, her attractiveness skin deep.

"A warm day," I said, and headed for the living room, sat myself down uninvited on the freshly upholstered couch, repository of wealth. Last night she'd led me to the dining-room table like a cop directing traffic. The couch was off-limits, except to her. Her knitting was lying there, waiting, but she remained on her feet, frozen-eyed.

"Is this the end of your first day," she asked mockingly, "or the beginning of your second?"

"Let's say the beginning of my second, Mrs. Bennett. The meter will read four hundred dollars."

"And you have something to report for our money, I presume."

"Yes—success. I know where the collection is. In fact, I'm sitting on it. I came early to give you a chance to dig it out of this couch before Harold arrives."

"I've no idea what you're talking about."

"Or maybe I'm leaning on it," I said. "Or both. Where are the coin books, Mrs. Bennett? In the cushions? The back? The springs? Where?"

"This is utterly ridiculous."

"What we can do," I said, "is make up a story to take the cutting

edge off the thing—like maybe you thought the couch would be a better hiding place than the linen chest, and you were going to tell him later. Weak, but better than nothing. Otherwise he might break your leg.”

“This is utterly ridiculous,” she repeated, unshaken.

“You weren’t very smart,” I rambled on. “You should have set it up to look more like a robbery, strewn stuff around, left a window open— But then, maybe you did, and he was too bombed to notice. Maybe he hasn’t noticed anything in years and you thought, what the hell, just do it. I can imagine that.”

She sat down and took up her knitting as though I weren’t there.

“Look, Mrs. Bennett,” I said, twisting her way, “I sympathize with you, I really do, but the fat’s in the fire now—so let’s try to get it out.”

“I have nothing further to say to you.”

“He’ll come home and I’ll tell him and he’ll rip your lovely couch to shreds—is that what you want?”

She was silent, the needles flying.

I sighed and stood up and probed with my fist the cushion I’d been sitting on, searching for an unusual resistance, but finding none. They were in the back, then, or the springs, much more likely places. But I still didn’t doubt—

He got home at five thirty, coming in from the kitchen with a drink in his inky, unwashed hand; and I told him my theory in unsparing detail while she sat there and knitted. Madame La Farge.

He put down his drink and told her to get up, which she did in silence; and then he threw the cushions aside and turned the couch over and began tearing off the thin black fabric on the bottom. He was in a rage, and Mrs. Bennett, still icy-calm, the knitting cradled in her arms like a sleeping child, said, “I’m not going to watch this,” and began walking away. But I caught her arm, another idea—the only other possible idea—entering my mind full-blown.

“No!” I said. “You stay, Mrs. Bennett. No phone calls to Coleman.”

Bennett had ripped a hole in the fabric and rammed a dirty hand through it, searching around. He found nothing, which no longer surprised me.

“It’s not there,” I said. “It’s in another couch in another place. Come on, let’s go there.” I still gripped Mrs. Bennett’s arm. “All three of us.”

I’d got Coleman’s address from Burns that afternoon and knew

exactly where it was, in Haight-Ashbury, not far from my place.

It was a small apartment in an old building and we got there a little after six thirty, but he was gone. I went downstairs to the manager's apartment and she told me that Coleman had checked out that afternoon, suddenly, leaving no forwarding address. I told her who I was and to bring her keys and come along. She did, an old hand at this sort of thing.

He'd taken nothing but his clothes. And the coin collection. The fabric on the back of the couch had been slashed from end to end, hanging open like a saber wound. Bennett tore the rest of it off, groaning, but he'd find nothing.

I turned to Mrs. Bennett. "You phoned him last night," I said, "or this morning, and told him to beat it, the heat was on. You were one step ahead of us, weren't you?"

"Don't be ridiculous," she said, shivering. It was too cold for her in the room.

"You'll get your divorce and meet him later somewhere, and live happily ever after—that's the plan, isn't it?"

"I don't know what you're talking about." She was very pretty standing there, but there was nothing in her any more, the cold gray ash of burned-out dreams. It had taken a while to see it, to feel it.

"But don't count on it," I said with some sympathy. "Maybe he's gone forever. After all, you gave him the money, he didn't steal it. And maybe he sensed the cold, too—and grew afraid."

I drove them back to their house and wrote out a bill and left it on the dining-room table—without much hope.

Then I went home, driving under a moon that the Ohlones had once worshipped. But that we walk on.

It may have been better then.

"Q"

a **NEW** short story by

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Brenda—stranded in Hawaii . . . Brenda—listless, lonely, wretched, desperate, at the end of her emotional rope and almost penniless . . . Brenda—"she wasn't ugly; she wasn't even plain, really . . . perhaps she was too bony, her shoulders too big, flat in front, not enough flesh on her—but there were men who liked their women bony" . . .

SCRIMSHAW

by **BRIAN GARFIELD**

She suggested liquid undulation: a lei-draped girl in a grass skirt under a windblown palm tree, her hands and hips expressive of the flow of the hula. Behind her, beyond the surf, a whaling ship was poised to approach the shore, its square-rigged sails bold against a polished white sky.

The scene was depicted meticulously upon ivory: a white fragment of tusk the size of a dollar bill. The etched detail was exquisite: the scrimshaw engraving was carved of thousands of thread-like lines and the artist's knife hadn't slipped once.

The price tag may have been designed to persuade tourists of the seriousness of the art form: it was in four figures. But Brenda was unimpressed. She put the piece back on the display cabinet and left the shop.

The hot Lahaina sun beat against her face and she went across Front Street to the Sea Wall, thrust her hands into the pockets of her dress and brooded upon the anchorage.

Boats were moored around the harbor—catamarans, glass-bottom tourist boats, marlin fishermen, pleasure sailboats, outrigger canoes, yachts. Playthings. It's the wrong place for me, she thought.

Beyond the wide channel the islands of Lanai and Kahoolawe

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made lovely horizons under their umbrellas of delicate cloud, but Brenda had lost her eye for that sort of thing; she noticed the stagnant heat, the shabbiness of the town, and the offensiveness of the tourists who trudged from shop to shop in their silly hats, their sunburnt flab, their hapless T-shirts emblazoned with local graffiti: "Here Today, Gone to Maui."

A leggy young girl went by, drawing Brenda's brief attention: one of those taut tan sunbleached creatures of the surfboards—gorgeous and luscious and vacuous. Filled with youth and hedonism, equipped with all the optional accessories of pleasure. Brenda watched gloomily, her eyes following the girl as far as the end of the Sea Wall, where the girl turned to cross the street. Brenda then noticed two men in conversation there.

One of them was the wino who always seemed to be there: a stringy unshaven tattered character who spent the days huddling in the shade sucking from a bottle in a brown bag and begging coins from tourists. At night he seemed to prowl the alleys behind the seafood restaurants, living off scraps like a stray dog; she had seen him once, from the window of her flyspecked room, scrounging in the can behind the hotel's kitchen; and then two nights ago near a garbage bin she had taken a short cut home after a dissatisfying lonely dinner and she'd nearly tripped over him.

The man talking with the wino seemed familiar and yet she could not place the man. He had the lean bearded look of one who had gone native; but not really, for he was set apart by his fastidiousness. He wore sandals, yet his feet seemed clean, the toenails glimmering; he wore a sandy beard but it was neatly trimmed and his hair was expensively cut, not at all shaggy; he wore a blue denim short-sleeved shirt, fashionably faded but it had sleeve pockets and epaulets and had come from a designer shop; and his white sailor's trousers fit perfectly.

I know him, Brenda thought, but she couldn't summon the energy to stir from her spot when the bearded man and the wino walked away into the town. Vaguely and without real interest she wondered idly what those two could possibly have to talk about together.

She found shade on the harborfront. Inertia held her there for hours while she recounted the litany of her misfortunes. Finally hunger bestirred her and she slouched back to her miserable little third-class hotel.

The next day, half drunk in the afternoon and wilting in the heat,

Brenda noticed vaguely that the wino was no longer in his usual place. In fact, she hadn't seen the wino at all, not last night and not today.

The headache was painful and she boarded the jitney bus to go up-island a few miles. She got off near the Kapalua headland and trudged down to the public beach. It was cooler here because the northwest end of the island was open to the fresh trade winds; she settled under a palm tree, pulled off her ragged sneakers, and dug her toes into the cool sand. The toes weren't very clean. She was going too long between baths these days. The bathroom in the hotel was at the end of the corridor and she went there as infrequently as possible because she couldn't be sure who she might encounter and anyhow, the tub was filthy and there was no shower.

Across the channel loomed the craggy mountains of Molokai, infamous island, leper colony, its dark volcanic mass shadowed by perpetual sinister rain clouds, and Brenda lost herself in gruesome speculations about exile, isolation, loneliness, and wretched despair, none of which seemed at all foreign to her.

The sun moved and took the shade with it and she moved round to the other side of the palm tree, tucking the fabric of the cheap dress under her when she sat down. The dress was about gone—frayed, faded, the material ready to disintegrate. She only had two others left. Then it would be jeans and the boatneck. It didn't matter, really. There was no one to dress up for.

It wasn't that she was altogether ugly; she wasn't ugly; she wasn't even plain, really; she had studied photographs of herself over the years and she had gazed in the mirror and tried to understand, but it had eluded her. All right, perhaps she was too bony, her shoulders too big, flat in front, not enough flesh on her—but there were men who liked their women bony; that didn't explain it. She had the proper features in the proper places and, after all, Modigliani hadn't found that sort of face abominable to behold, had he?

But ever since puberty there'd been something about her gangly gracelessness that had isolated her. Invitations to go out had been infrequent. At parties no one ever initiated conversations with her. No one, in any case, until Briggs had appeared in her life.

... She noticed the man again: the well-dressed one with the neatly trimmed beard. A droopy brown Hawaiian youth was picking up litter on the beach and depositing it in a burlap sack he dragged along; the bearded man ambled beside the youth, talking to him. The Hawaiian said something; the bearded man nodded with evident

disappointment and turned to leave the beach. His path brought him close by Brenda's palm tree and Brenda sat up abruptly. "Eric?"

The bearded man squinted into the shade, trying to recognize her. Brenda removed her sunglasses. She said, "Eric? Eric Morelius?"

"Brenda?" The man came closer and she contrived a wan smile. "Brenda Briggs? What the devil are you doing here? You look like a beachcomber gone to seed."

Over a drink in Kimo's she tried to put on a front. "Well, I thought I'd come out here on a sabbatical and, you know, loaf around the islands, recharge my batteries, take stock."

She saw that Eric wasn't buying it. She tried to smile. "And what about you?"

"Well, I live here, you know. Came out to Hawaii nine years ago on vacation and never went back." Eric had an easy relaxed attitude of confident assurance. "Come off it, duckie, you look like hell. What's happened to you?"

She contrived a shrug of indifference. "The world fell down around my ankles. Happens to most everybody sometimes, I suppose. It doesn't matter."

"Just like that? It must have been something terrible. You had more promise than anyone in the department."

"Well, we were kids then, weren't we. We were all promising young scholars. But what happens after you've broken all the promises?"

"Good Lord. The last I saw of you, you and Briggs were off to revitalize the University of what, New Mexico?"

"Arizona." She tipped her head back with the glass to her mouth; ice clicked against her teeth. "And after that a state college in Minnesota. And then a dinky jerkwater diploma mill in California. The world," she said in a quiet voice, "has little further need of second-rate Greek and Roman literature scholars—or for any sort of non-tenured Ph.D.'s in the humanities. I spent last year waiting on tables in Modesto."

"Duckie," Eric said, "there's one thing you haven't mentioned. Where's Briggs?"

She hesitated. Then — what did it matter?—she told him: "He left me. Four years ago. Divorced me and married a buxom life-of-the-party girl fifteen years younger than me. She was writing advertising copy for defective radial tires or carcinogenic deodorants or something like that. We had a kid, you know. Cute little guy, we

named him Geoff, with a G—you know how Briggs used to love reading Chaucer. In the original. In retrospect, you know, Briggs was a prig and a snob.”

“Where’s the kid, then?”

“I managed to get custody and then six months ago he went to visit his father for the weekend and all three of them, Briggs and the copy-writer and my kid Geoff well, there was a six-car pileup on the Santa Monica Freeway and I had to pay for the funerals and it wiped me out.”

Eric brought another pair of drinks and there was a properly responsive sympathy in his eyes and it had been so long since she’d talked about it that she covered her face with the table napkin and sobbed. “God help me, Eric. Briggs was the only man who ever gave me a second look.”

He walked her along the Sea Wall. “You’ll get over it, duckie. Takes time.”

“Sure,” she said listlessly. “I know.”

“Sure, it can be tough. Especially when you haven’t got anybody. You don’t have any family left, do you?”

“No. Only child. My parents died young. Why not? The old man was on the assembly line in Dearborn. We’re all on the assembly line in Dearborn. What have we got to aim for? A condominium in some ant-hill and a bag full of golf clubs? Let’s change the subject, all right? What about you, then? You look prosperous enough. Did you drop out or were you pushed too?”

“Dropped out. Saw the light and made it to the end of the tunnel. I’m a free man, duckie.”

“What do you do?”

“I’m a scrimshander.”

“A what?”

“A bone-ivory artist. I do scrimshaw engravings. You’ve probably seen my work in the shop windows around town.”

Eric’s studio, high under the eaves in the vintage whaler’s house that looked more New Englandish than tropical, revealed its owner’s compulsion for orderly neatness.

She had never liked him much. He and Briggs had got along all right, but she’d always found Eric an unpleasant sort. It wasn’t that he was boorish; hardly anything like that. But she thought him pretentious and totally insincere. He’d always had that air of ar-

rogant self-assurance. And the polish was all on the surface; he had the right manners but once you got to know him a little you realized he had no real understanding of courtesy or compassion. Those qualities were meaningless to people like Eric. She'd always thought him self-absorbed and egotistical to the point of solipsism; she'd felt he had cultivated Briggs's friendship simply because Eric felt Briggs could help him advance in the department.

Eric had been good at toadying up to anyone who could help him learn the arts of politics and ambition. Eric had always been very actorish: he wasn't real—everything was a role, a part, a performance: everything Eric did was done with his audience in mind. If you couldn't be any help to him he could, without a second thought, cut you dead.

He wasn't really handsome. He had a small round head and ordinary features. But he'd always kept himself trim and he'd always been a natty dresser. And the beard sharpened his face, made it longer, added polish to his appearance. Back on the mainland, she remembered, he'd tended to favor three-piece suits.

Eric's studio was spartan, dominated by a scrubbed-clean workbench under the dormer window's north light. An array of carving tools filled a wooden rack, each tool seated in its proper niche, and there were four tidy wooden bins containing pieces of white bone of graduated sizes. Antique inkwells and jars were arranged beside a tray of paintbrushes and other slender implements. In three glass display cases, each overhung by a museum light, lay examples of Eric's art. One piece, especially striking, was a large ivory cribbage board in the shape of a Polynesian outrigger canoe with intricate black-and-white scenes engraved upon its faceted surfaces.

"That's a sort of frieze," Eric explained. "If you follow those little scenes around the board, they illustrate the whole mythology of the Polynesian emigration that led to the original settlement of Hawaii a thousand years ago. I'm negotiating to sell it to the museum over in Honolulu."

"It must be pretty lucrative, this stuff."

"It can be. Do you know anything about scrimshaw?"

"No," she said, and she didn't particularly care to; but Eric had paid for the bottle and was pouring a drink for her, and she was desperate for company—anyone's, even Eric's—and so she stayed and pretended interest.

"It's a genuine American folk art. It was originated in the early 1800s by the Yankee whalers who came out to the Pacific with

endless time on their hands on shipboard. They got into the habit of scrimshanding to pass the time. The early stuff was crude, of course, but pretty quickly some of them started doing quite sophisticated workmanship. They used sail needles to carve the fine lines of the engraving and then they'd trace India ink or lampblack into the carvings for contrast. About the only materials they had were whalebone and whales' teeth, so that's what they carved at first.

"The art became very popular for a while, about a century ago, and there was a period when scrimshanding became a profession in its own right. That was when they ran short of whalebone and teeth and started illustrating elephant ivory and other white bone materials. Then it all went out of fashion. But it's been coming back into favor the past few years. We've got several scrimshanders here now. The main problem today, of course, is the scarcity of ivory."

At intervals Brenda sipped his whiskey and vocalized sounds indicative of her attentiveness to his monologue. Mainly she was thinking morosely of the pointlessness of it all. Was Eric going to ask her to stay the night? If he did, would she accept? In either case, did it matter?

Watching her with bemused eyes, Eric went on, "The Endangered Species laws have made it impossible for us to obtain whalebone or elephant ivory in any quantities any more. It's a real problem."

"You seem to have a fair supply in those bins there."

"Well, some of us have been buying mastodon ivory and other fossilized bones from the Eskimos—they dig for it in the tundra up in Alaska. But that stuff's in short supply too, and the price has gone through the ceiling."

Eric took her glass and filled it from the bottle, extracting ice cubes from the half-size fridge under the workbench. She rolled the cold glass against her forehead and returned to the wicker chair, balancing herself with care. Eric smiled with the appearance of sympathy and pushed a little box across the bench. It was the size of a matchbox. The lid fit snugly. Etched into its ivory surface was a drawing of a humpback whale.

"Like it?"

"It's lovely." She tried to summon enthusiasm in her voice.

"It's nearly the real thing," he said. "Not real ivory, of course, but real bone at least. We've been experimenting with chemical processes to bleach and harden it."

She studied the tiny box and suddenly looked away. Something about it had put her in mind of little Geoff's casket.

"The bones of most animals are too rough and porous," Eric was saying. "They tend to decompose, of course, being organic. But we've had some success with chemical hardening agents. Still, there aren't many types of bone that are suitable. Of course, there are some people who're willing to make do with vegetable ivory or hard plastics, but those really aren't acceptable if you care about the artistry of the thing. The phony stuff has no grain, and anybody with a good eye can always tell."

She was thinking she really had to pull herself together. You couldn't get by indefinitely on self-pity and the liquid largess of old acquaintances, met by chance, whom you didn't even like. She'd reached a point-of-no-return: the end of this week her room rent would be due again and she had no money to cover it; the time to make up her mind was now, right now, because either she got a job or she'd end up like that whiskered wino begging for pennies and eating out of refuse bins.

Eric went on prattling about his silly hobby or whatever it was: something about the larger bones of primates—thigh bone, collar-bone. "Young enough to be in good health of course — bone grows uselessly brittle as we get older . . ." But she wasn't really listening; she stood beside the workbench looking out through the dormer window at the dozens of boats in the anchorage, wondering if she could face walking into one of the tourist dives and begging for a job waiting on tables.

The drink had made her unsteady. She returned to the chair, resolving to explore the town first thing in the morning in search of employment. She *had* to snap out of it. It was time to come back to life and perhaps these beautiful islands were the place to do it: the proper setting for the resurrection of a jaded soul.

Eric's voice paused interrogatively and it made her look up. "What? Sorry."

"These two here," Eric said. She looked down at the two etched pendants. He said, "Can you tell the difference?"

"They look pretty much the same to me."

"There, see that? That one, on the left, that's a piece of whale's tooth. This other one's ordinary bone, chemically hardened and bleached to the consistency and color of true ivory. It's got the proper grain, everything."

"Fine." She set the glass down and endeavored to smile pleasantly. "That's fine, Eric. Thank you so much for the drinks. I'd better go now—" She aimed herself woozily toward the door.

"No need to rush off, is there? Here, have one more and then we'll get a bite to eat. There's a terrific little place back on the inland side of town."

"Thanks, really, but—"

"I won't take no for an answer, duckie. How often do we see each other, after all? Come on—look, I'm sorry, I've been boring you to tears with all this talk about scrimshaw and dead bones, and we haven't said a word yet about the really important things."

"What important things?"

"Well, what are we going to do about you, duckie? You seem to have a crucial problem with your life right now and I think, if you let me, maybe I can help sort it out. Sometimes all it takes is the counsel of a sympathetic old friend, you know."

By then the drink had been poured and she saw no plausible reason to refuse it. She settled back in the cane chair. Eric's smile was avuncular. "What are friends for, after all? Relax a while, duckie. You know, when I first came out here I felt a lot the way you're feeling. I guess in a way I was lucky not to've been as good a scholar as you and Briggs were. I got through the Ph.D. program by the skin of my teeth but it wasn't enough. I applied for teaching jobs all over the country, you know. Not one nibble."

Then the quick smile flashed behind the neat beard. "I ran away, you see—as far as I could get without a passport. These islands are full of losers like you and me, you know. Scratch any charter-boat skipper in that marina and you'll find a bankrupt or a failed writer who couldn't get his epic novel published."

Then he lifted his glass in a gesture of toast. "But it's possible to find an antidote for our failure, you see. Sometimes it may take a certain ruthlessness, of course—a willingness to suspend the stupid values we were brought up on. So-called civilized principles are the enemies of any true individualist—you have to learn that or you're doomed to be a loser for all time. The kings and robber barons we've honored throughout history—none of them was the kind to let himself be pushed around by the imbecilic bureaucratic whims of college deans or tenure systems.

"Establishments and institutions and laws are designed by winners to keep losers in their place, that's all. You're only free when you learn there's no reason to play the game by their rules. Hell, duckie, the fun of life only comes when you discover how to make your own rules and laugh at the fools around you. Look—consider your own situation. Is there any single living soul right now who

truly gives a damn whether you, Brenda Briggs, are alive or dead?"

Put that starkly it made her gape. Eric leaned forward, brandishing his glass as if it were a searchlight aimed at her face. "Well?"

"No. Nobody," she murmured reluctantly.

"There you are, then." He seemed to relax; he leaned back. "There's not a soul you need to please or impress or support, right? If you went right up Front Street here and walked into the Bank of Hawaii and robbed the place of a fortune and got killed making your escape, you'd be hurting no one but yourself. Am I right, duckie?"

"I suppose so."

"Then why not give it a try?"

"Give what a try?"

"Robbing a bank. Kidnaping a rich infant. Hijacking a yacht. Stealing a million in diamonds. Whatever you feel like, duckie—whatever appeals to you. Why not? What have you got to lose?"

She twisted her mouth into an uneven smile. "You remind me of the sophomoric sophistry we used to spout when we were undergraduates. Existentialism and nihilism galore." She put her glass down. "Well, I guess not, Eric. I don't think I'll start robbing banks just yet."

"And why not?"

"Maybe I'm just not gaited that way."

"Morality? Is that it? What's morality ever done for *you*?"

She steadied herself with a hand against the workbench, set her feet with care, and turned toward the door. "It's a drink too late for morbid philosophical dialectics. Thanks for the booze, though. I'll see you . . ."

"You'd better sit down, duckie. You're a little unsteady there."

"No, I—"

"Sit down." The words came out in a harsher voice. "The door's locked anyway, duckie—you're not going anywhere."

She scowled, befuddled. "What?"

He showed her the key; then he put it away in his pocket. She looked blankly at the door, the keyhole, and—again—his face. It had gone hard; the polite mask was gone.

"I wish you'd taken the bait," he said. "Around here all they ever talk about is sunsets and surfing and the size of the marlin some fool caught. At least you've got a bigger vocabulary than that. I really wish you'd jumped at it, duckie. It would have made things easier. But you didn't, so that's that."

"What on earth are you talking about?"

She stumbled to the door then—and heard Eric's quiet laughter when she tried the knob.

She put her back to the door. Her head swam. "I don't understand . . ."

"It's the ivory, duckie. The best material is fresh human bone. The consistency, the hardness—it takes a fine polish if it's young and healthy enough . . ."

She stared at him and the understanding seeped into her slowly and she said, "That's where the wino went."

"Well, I have to pick and choose, don't I? I mean, I can't very well use people whose absence would be noticed."

She flattened herself against the door. She was beginning to pass out; she tried to fight it but she couldn't; in the distance, fading, she heard Eric say, "You'll make fine bones, duckie. Absolutely first-rate scrimshaw."

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a **NEW** short story by

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"The crunch of carriage wheels on the gravel drive when there was no carriage or any kind of vehicle to be seen. Doors closing softly when no doors had been left open. Footsteps crossing . . ." And the drawing room—"it felt strange to her, chilly even in summer, and indefinably hostile."

Resist reading—if you can . . .

THE HAUNTING OF SHAWLEY RECTORY

by RUTH RENDELL

I don't believe in the supernatural, but just the same I wouldn't live in Shawley Rectory.

That was what I had been thinking and what Gordon Scott said to me when we heard we were to have a new Rector at St. Mary's. Our wives gave us quizzical looks.

"Not very logical," said Eleanor, my wife.

"What I mean is," said Gordon, "that however certain you might be that ghosts don't exist, if you lived in a place that was reputedly haunted you wouldn't be able to help wondering every time you heard a stair creak. All the normal sounds of an old house would take on a different significance."

I agreed with him. It wouldn't be very pleasant feeling uneasy every time one was alone in one's own home at night.

"Personally," said Patsy Scott, "I've always believed there are no ghosts in the Rectory that a good central-heating system wouldn't get rid of."

We laughed at that, but Eleanor said, "You can't just dismiss it

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like that. The Cobworths heard and felt things even if they didn't actually see anything. And so did the Bucklands before them. And you won't find anyone more level-headed than Kate Cobworth."

Patsy shrugged. "The Loys didn't even hear or feel anything. They'd heard the stories, they *expected* to hear the footsteps and the carriage wheels. Diana Loy told me. And Diana was quite a nervy highly strung sort of person. But absolutely nothing happened while they were there."

"Well, maybe the Church of England or whoever's responsible will install central heating for the new parson." I said, "and we'll see if your theory's right, Patsy."

Eleanor and I went home after that. We went on foot because our house is only about a quarter of a mile up Shawley Lane. On the way we stopped in front of the Rectory which is about a hundred yards along. We stood and looked over the gate.

I may as well describe the Rectory to you before I get on with this story. The date of it is around 1760 and it's built of pale dun-colored brick with plain classical windows and a front door in the middle with a pediment over it. It's a big house with three reception rooms, six bedrooms, two kitchens, and two staircases—and one poky little bathroom made by having converted a linen closet. The house is a bit stark to look at, a bit forbidding; it seems to stare straight back at you, but the trees round it are pretty enough and so are the stables on the left-hand side with a clock in their gable and a weathervane on top. Tom Cobworth, the last Rector, kept his old Morris in there. The garden is huge, a wilderness that no one could keep tidy these days—eight acres of it including the glebe.

It was years since I had been inside the Rectory. I remember wondering if the interior was as shabby and in need of paint as the outside. The windows had that black, blank, hazy look of windows at which no curtains hang and which no one has cleaned for months or even years.

"Who exactly does it *belong* to?" said Eleanor.

"Lazarus College, Oxford," I said. "Tom was a Fellow of Lazarus."

"And what about this new man?"

"I don't know," I said. "I think all that system of livings has changed but I'm pretty vague about it."

I'm not a churchgoer, not religious at all really. Perhaps that was why I hadn't got to know the Cobworths all that well. I used to feel a bit uneasy in Tom's company, I used to have the feeling he might suddenly round on me and demand to know why he never saw me

in church. Eleanor had no such inhibitions with Kate. They were friends, close friends, and Eleanor had missed her after Tom died suddenly of a heart attack and she had had to leave the Rectory. She had gone back to her people up north, taking her fifteen-year-old daughter Louise with her.

Kate is a practical down-to-earth Yorkshirewoman. She had been a nurse—a ward sister, I believe—before her marriage. When Tom got the living of Shawley she several times met Mrs. Buckland, the wife of the retiring incumbent, and from her learned to expect what Mrs. Buckland called “manifestations.”

“I couldn’t believe she was actually saying it,” Kate had said to Eleanor. “I thought I was dreaming and then I thought she was mad. I mean really psychotic, mentally ill. Ghosts! I ask you—people believing things like that in this day and age. And then we moved in and I heard them too.”

The crunch of carriage wheels on the gravel drive when there was no carriage or any kind of vehicle to be seen. Doors closing softly when no doors had been left open. Footsteps crossing the landing and going downstairs, crossing the hall, then the front door opening softly and closing softly.

“But how could you bear it?” Eleanor said. “Weren’t you afraid? Weren’t you terrified?”

“We got used to it. We had to, you see. It wasn’t as if we could sell the house and buy another. Besides, I love Shawley—I loved it from the first moment I set foot in the village. After the harshness of the north, Dorset is so gentle and mild and pretty. The doors closing and the footsteps and the wheels on the drive—they didn’t do us any harm. And we had each other, we weren’t alone. You can get used to anything—to ghosts as much as to damp and woodworm and dry rot. There’s all that in the Rectory too and I found it much more trying!”

The Bucklands, apparently, had got used to it too. Thirty years he had been Rector of the parish, thirty years they had lived there with the wheels and the footsteps, and had brought up their son and daughter there. No harm had come to them; they slept soundly, and their grownup children used to joke about their haunted house.

“Nobody ever seems to *see* anything,” I said to Eleanor as we walked home. “And no one ever comes up with a story, a sort of background to all this walking about and banging and crunching. Is there supposed to have been a murder there or some other sort of violent death?”

She said she didn't know, Kate had never said. The sound of the wheels, the closing of the doors, always took place at about nine in the evening, followed by the footsteps and the opening and closing of the front door. After that there was silence, and it hadn't happened every evening by any means. The only other thing was that Kate had never cared to use the big drawing room in the evenings. She and Tom and Louise had always stayed in the dining room or the morning room.

They did use the drawing room in the daytime—it was just that in the evenings the room felt strange to her, chilly even in summer, and indefinitely hostile. Once she had had to go in there at ten thirty. She needed her reading glasses which she had left in the drawing room during the afternoon. She ran into the room and ran out again. She hadn't looked about her, just rushed in, keeping her eyes fixed on the eyeglass case on the mantelpiece. The icy hostility in that room had really frightened her, and that had been the only time she had felt dislike and fear of Shawley Rectory.

Of course one doesn't have to find explanations for an icy hostility. It's much more easily understood as being the product of tension and fear than aural phenomena are. I didn't have much faith in Kate's feelings about the drawing room. I thought with a kind of admiration of Jack and Diana Loy, that elderly couple who had rented the Rectory for a year after Kate's departure, had been primed with stories of hauntings by Kate, yet had neither heard nor felt a thing. As far as I know, they had used that drawing room constantly. Often, when I had passed the gate in their time, I had seen lights in the drawing-room windows, at nine, at ten thirty, and even at midnight.

The Loys had been gone three months. When Lazarus had first offered the Rectory for rent, the idea had been that Shawley should do without a clergyman of its own. I think this must have been the Church economizing—nothing to do certainly with ghosts. The services at St. Mary's were to be undertaken by the Vicar of the next parish, Mr. Hartley. Whether he found this too much for him in conjunction with the duties of his own parish or whether the powers-that-be in affairs Anglican had second thoughts, I can't say; but on the departure of the Loys it was decided there should be an incumbent to replace Tom.

The first hint of this we had from local gossip; next the facts appeared in our monthly news sheet, the *Shawley Post*. Couched in its customary parish magazine journalese it said: "Shawley resi-

dents all extend a hearty welcome to their new Rector, the Reverend Stephen Galton, whose coming to the parish with his charming wife will fill a long-felt need."

"He's very young," said Eleanor a few days after our discussion of haunting with the Scotts. "Under thirty."

"That won't bother me," I said. "I don't intend to be preached at by him. Anyway, why not? Out of the mouths of babes and sucklings," I said, "hast Thou ordained strength."

"Hark at the devil quoting scripture," said Eleanor. "They say his wife's only twenty-three."

I thought she must have met them, she knew so much. But no.

"It's just what's being said. Patsy got it from Judy Lawrence. Judy said they're moving in next month and her mother's coming with them."

"Who, Judy's?" I said.

"Don't be silly," said my wife. "Mrs. Galton's mother, the Rector's mother-in-law. She's coming to live with them."

Move in they did. And out again two days later.

The first we knew that something had gone very wrong for the Galtons was when I was out for my usual evening walk with our Irish setter Liam. We were coming back past the cottage that belongs to Charlie Lawrence (who is by way of being Shawley's squire) and which he keeps for the occupation of his gardener when he is lucky enough to have a gardener. At that time, last June, he hadn't had a gardener for at least six months, and the cottage should have been empty. As I approached, however, I saw a woman's face, young, fair, very pretty, at one of the upstairs windows.

I rounded the hedge and Liam began an insane barking, for just inside the cottage gate, on the drive, peering in under the hood of an aged Wolseley, was a tall young man wearing a tweed sports jacket over one of those black-top things the clergy wear, and a clerical collar.

"Good evening," I said. "Shut up, Liam, will you?"

"Good evening," he said in a quiet, abstracted sort of way.

I told Eleanor. She couldn't account for the Galtons occupying Charlie Lawrence's gardener's cottage instead of Shawley Rectory, their proper abode. But Patsy Scott could. She came round on the following morning with a punnet of strawberries for us. The Scotts grow the best strawberries for miles around.

"They've been driven out by the ghosts," she said. "Can you credit

it? A clergyman of the Church of England! An educated man! They were in that place not forty-eight hours before they were screaming to Charlie Lawrence to find them somewhere else to go."

I asked her if she was sure it wasn't just the damp and the dry rot.

"Look, you know me. *I* don't believe the Rectory's haunted or anywhere *can* be haunted, come to that. I'm telling you what Mrs. Galton told me. She came in to us on Thursday morning and said did I think there was anyone in Shawley had a house or a cottage to rent because they couldn't stick the Rectory another night. I asked her what was wrong. And she said she knew it sounded crazy—it did too, she was right there—she knew it sounded mad, but they'd been terrified out of their lives by what they'd heard and seen since they moved in."

"*Seen?*" I said. "She actually claims to have seen something?"

"She said her mother did. She said her mother saw something in the drawing room the first evening they were there. They'd already heard the carriage wheels and the doors closing and the footsteps and all that. The second evening no one dared go in the drawing room. They heard all the sounds again and Mrs. Grainger—that's the mother—heard voices in the drawing room, and it was then that they decided they couldn't stand it, they'd have to get out."

"I don't believe it!" I said. "I don't believe any of it. The woman's a psychopath, she's playing some sort of ghastly joke."

"Just as Kate was and the Bucklands," said Eleanor quietly.

Patsy ignored her and turned to me. "I feel just like you. It's awful, but what can you do? These stories grow and they sort of infect people and the more suggestible the people are, the worse the infection. Charlie and Judy are furious, they don't want it getting in the papers that Shawley Rectory is haunted. Think of all the people we shall get coming in cars on Sundays and gawping over the gates. But they had to let them have the cottage in common humanity. Mrs. Grainger was hysterical and poor little Mrs. Galton wasn't much better. Who told them to expect all those horrors? That's what I'd like to know."

"What does Gordon say?" I said.

"He's keeping an open mind, but he says he'd like to spend an evening there."

In spite of the Lawrences' fury, the haunting of Shawley Rectory did get quite a lot of publicity. There was a sensational story about it in one of the popular Sundays and then Stephen Galton's mother-

in-law went on television. Western TV interviewed her on a local news program. I hadn't ever seen Mrs. Grainger in the flesh and her youthful appearance rather surprised me. She looked no more than 35, though she must be into her forties.

The interviewer asked her if she had ever heard any stories of ghosts at Shawley Rectory before she went there and she said she hadn't. Did she believe in ghosts? Now she did. What had happened, asked the interviewer, after they had moved in?

It had started at nine o'clock, she said, at nine on their first evening. She and her daughter were sitting in the bigger of the two kitchens, having a cup of coffee. They had been moving in all day, unpacking, putting things away. They heard two doors close upstairs, then footsteps coming down the main staircase. She had thought it was her son-in-law, except that it couldn't have been because as the footsteps died away he came in through the door from the back kitchen. They couldn't understand what it had been, but they weren't frightened. Not then.

"We were all planning on going to bed early," said Mrs. Grainger. She was very articulate, very much at her ease in front of the cameras. "Just about half-past ten I had to go into the big room they call the drawing room. The removal men had put some of our boxes in there and my radio was in one of them. I wanted to listen to my radio in bed. I opened the drawing-room door and put my hand to the light switch. I didn't put the light on. The moon was quite bright that night and it was shining into the room.

"There were two people, two figures, I don't know what to call them, between the windows. One of them, the girl, was lying huddled on the floor. The other figure, an older woman, was bending over her. She stood up when I opened the door and looked at me. I knew I wasn't seeing real people, I don't know how but I knew that. I remember I couldn't move my hand to switch the light on. I was frozen, just staring at that pale tragic face while it stared back at me. I did manage at last to back out and close the door, and I got back to my daughter and my son-in-law in the kitchen and I—well, I collapsed. It was the most terrifying experience of my life."

Yet you stayed a night and a day and another night in the Rectory? said the interviewer. Yes, well, her daughter and her son-in-law had persuaded her it had been some sort of hallucination, the consequence of being overtired. Not that she had ever really believed that. The night had been quiet and so had the next day until nine in the evening when they were all this time in the morning room

and they had heard a car drive up to the front door. They had all heard it, wheels crunching on the gravel, the sound of the engine, the brakes going on. Then had followed the closing of the doors upstairs and the footsteps, the opening and closing of the front door.

Yes, they had been very frightened, or she and her daughter had. Her son-in-law had made a thorough search of the whole house but found nothing, seen or heard no one. At ten thirty they had all gone into the hall and listened outside the drawing-room door and she and her daughter had heard voices from inside the room, women's voices. Stephen had wanted to go in, but they had stopped him, they had been so frightened.

Now the interesting thing was that there had been something in the *Sunday Express* account about the Rectory being haunted by the ghosts of two women. The story quoted someone it described as a "local antiquarian," a man named Joseph Lamb, whom I had heard of but never met. Lamb had told the *Express* there was an old tradition that the ghosts were of a mother and her daughter and that the mother had killed the daughter in the drawing room.

"I never heard any of that before," I said to Gordon Scott, "and I'm sure Kate Cobworth hadn't. Who is this Joseph Lamb?"

"He's a nice chap," said Gordon. "And he's supposed to know more of local history than anyone else around. I'll ask him over and you can come and meet him if you like."

Joseph Lamb lives in a rather fine Jacobean house in a hamlet—you could hardly call it a village—about a mile to the north of Shawley. I had often admired it without knowing who lived there. The Scotts asked him and his wife to dinner shortly after Mrs. Grainger's appearance on television, and after dinner we got him onto the subject of the hauntings. Lamb wasn't at all unwilling to enlighten us. He's a man of about 60 and he said he first heard the story of the two women from his nurse when he was a little boy. Not a very suitable subject with which to regale a seven-year-old, he said.

"These two are supposed to have lived in the Rectory at one time," he said. "The story is that the mother had a lover or a man friend or whatever, and the daughter took him away from her. When the daughter confessed it, the mother killed her in a jealous rage."

It was Eleanor who objected to this. "But surely if they lived in the Rectory they must have been the wife and daughter of a Rector. I don't really see how in those circumstances the mother could have had a lover or the daughter could steal him away."

"No, it doesn't sound much like what we've come to think of as

the domestic life of the English country parson, does it?" said Lamb. "And the strange thing is, although my nanny used to swear by the story and I heard it later from someone who worked at the Rectory, I haven't been able to find any trace of these women in the Rectory's history. It's not hard to research, you see, because only the Rectors of Shawley had ever lived there until the Loys rented it, and the Rectors' names are all up on that plaque in the church from 1380 onwards. There was another house on the site before this present one, of course, and parts of the older building are incorporated in the newer.

"My nanny used to say that the elder lady hadn't got a husband, he had presumably died. She was supposed to be forty years old and the girl nineteen. Well, I tracked back through the families of the various Rectors and I found a good many cases where the Rectors had predeceased their wives. But none of them fitted my nanny's story. They were either too old—one was much too young—or their daughters were too old or they had no daughters."

"It's a pity Mrs. Grainger didn't tell us what kind of clothes her ghosts were wearing," said Patsy with sarcasm. "You could have pinpointed the date then, couldn't you?"

"You mean that if the lady had had a steeple hat on she'd be medieval or around 1850 if she was wearing a crinoline?"

"Something like that," said Patsy.

At this point Gordon repeated his wish to spend an evening in the Rectory. "I think I'll write to the Master of Lazarus and ask permission," he said.

Very soon after we heard that the Rectory was to be sold. Notice boards appeared by the front gate and at the corner where the glebe abutted Shawley Lane, announcing that the house would go up for auction on October 30th. Patsy, who always seems to know everything, told us that a reserve price of £60,000 had been put on it.

"Not as much as I'd have expected," she said. "It must be the ghosts keeping the price down."

"Whoever buys it will have to spend another ten thousand on it," said Eleanor.

"And central heating will be a priority."

Whatever was keeping the price down—ghosts, cold, or dry rot—there were plenty of people anxious to view the house and land with, I supposed, an idea of buying it. I could hardly be at work in my garden or out with Liam without a car stopping and the driver asking me the way to the Rectory. Gordon and Patsy got quite

irritable about what they described as "crowds milling about" in the lane and trippers everywhere, waving orders to view.

The estate agents handling the sale were a firm called Curlew, Pond and Co. Gordon didn't bother with the Master of Lazarus but managed to get the key from Graham Curlew, whom he knew quite well, and permission to spend an evening in the Rectory. Curlew didn't like the idea of anyone staying the night, but Gordon didn't want to do that anyway; no one had ever heard or seen anything after ten thirty. He asked me if I'd go with him. Patsy wouldn't—she thought it was all too adolescent and stupid.

"Of course I will," I said. "As long as you'll agree to our taking some sort of heating arrangement with us and brandy in case of need."

By then it was the beginning of October and the evenings were turning cool. The day on which we decided to have our vigil happened also to be the one on which Stephen Galton and his wife moved out of Charlie Lawrence's cottage and left Shawley for good. According to the *Shawley Post*, he had got a living in Manchester. Mrs. Grainger had gone back to her own home in London from where she had written an article about the Rectory for *Psychic News*.

Patsy shrieked with laughter to see the two of us setting forth with our oil stove, a dozen candles, two torches, and half a bottle of Courvoisier. She did well to laugh, her amusement wasn't misplaced. We crossed the lane and opened the Rectory gate and went up the gravel drive on which those spirit wheels had so often been heard to crunch. It was seven o'clock in the evening and still light. The day had been fine and the sky was red with the aftermath of a spectacular sunset.

I unlocked the front door and in we went.

The first thing I did was put a match to one of the candles because it wasn't at all light inside. We walked down the passage to the kitchens, I carrying the candle and Gordon shining one of the torches across the walls. The place was a mess. I suppose it hadn't had anything done to it, not even a cleaning, since the Loys moved out. It smelled damp and there was even fungus growing in patches on the kitchen walls. And it was extremely cold. There was a kind of deathly chill in the air, far more of a chill than one would have expected on a warm day in October. That kitchen had the feel you get when you open the door of a refrigerator that hasn't been kept too clean and is in need of defrosting.

We put our stuff down on a kitchen table someone had left behind

and made our way up the back stairs. All the bedroom doors were open and we closed them. The upstairs had a neglected, dreary feel but it was less cold. We went down the main staircase, a rather fine curving affair with elegant banisters and carved newel posts, and entered the drawing room. It was empty, palely lit by the evening light from two windows. On the mantelpiece was a glass jar with greenish water in it, a half-burnt candle in a saucer, and a screwed-up paper table napkin. We had decided not to remain in this room but to open the door and look in at ten thirty; so accordingly we returned to the kitchen, fetched out candles and torches and brandy, and settled down in the morning room, which was at the front of the house, on the other side of the front door.

Curlew had told Gordon there were a couple of deckchairs in this room. We found them resting against the wall and we put them up. We lit our oil stove and a second candle, and we set one candle on the window sill and one on the floor between us. It was still and silent and cold. The dark closed in fairly rapidly, the red fading from the sky which became a deep hard blue, then indigo.

We sat and talked. It was about the haunting that we talked, collating the various pieces of evidence, assessing the times this or that was supposed to happen and making sure we both knew the sequence in which things happened. We were both wearing watches and I remember that we constantly checked the time. At half-past eight we again opened the drawing-room door and looked inside. The moon had come up and was shining through the windows as it had shone for Mrs. Grainger.

Gordon went upstairs with a torch and checked that all the doors remained closed and then we both looked into the other large downstairs room, the dining room, I suppose. Here a fanlight in one of the windows was open. That accounted for some of the feeling of cold and damp, Gordon said. The window must have been opened by some prospective buyer, viewing the place. We closed it and went back into the morning room to wait.

The silence was absolute. We didn't talk any more. We waited, watching the candles and the glow of the stove which had taken some of the chill from the air. Outside it was pitch-dark. The hands of our watches slowly approached nine.

At three minutes to nine we heard the noise.

Not wheels or doors closing or a tread on the stairs but a faint, dainty, pattering sound. It was very faint, it was distant, it was on the ground floor. It was as if made by something less than human,

lighter than that, tiptoeing. I had never thought about this moment beyond telling myself that if anything did happen, if there was a manifestation, it would be enormously interesting. It had never occurred to me even once that I should be so dreadfully, so hideously, afraid.

I didn't look at Gordon, I couldn't. I couldn't move either. The pattering feet were less faint now, were coming closer. I felt myself go white, the blood all drawn in from the surface of my skin, as I was gripped by that awful primitive terror that has nothing to do with reason or with knowing what you believe in and what you don't.

Gordon got to his feet and stood there looking at the door. And then I couldn't stand it any more. I jumped up and threw open the door, holding the candle aloft—and looked into a pair of brilliant, golden-green eyes, staring steadily back at me about a foot from the ground.

"My God," said Gordon. "My God, it's Lawrences' cat. It must have got in through the window."

He bent down and picked up the cat, a soft, stout, marmalade-colored creature. I felt sick at the anticlimax. The time was exactly nine o'clock. With the cat draped over his arm, Gordon went back into the morning room and I followed him. We didn't sit down. We stood waiting for the wheels and the closing of the doors.

Nothing happened.

I have no business to keep you in suspense any longer, for the fact is that after that business with the cat nothing happened at all. At nine fifteen we sat down in our deckchairs. The cat lay on the floor beside the oil stove and went to sleep. Twice we heard a car pass along Shawley Lane, a remotely distant sound, but we heard nothing else.

"Feel like a spot of brandy?" said Gordon.

"Why not?" I said.

So we each had a nip of brandy and at ten we had another look in the drawing room. By then we were both feeling bored and quite sure that since nothing had happened at nine nothing would happen at ten thirty either. Of course we stayed till ten thirty and for half an hour after that, and then we decamped. We put the cat over the wall into Lawrences' grounds and went back to Gordon's house where Patsy awaited us, smiling cynically.

I had had quite enough of the Rectory but that wasn't true of Gordon. He said it was well-known that the phenomena didn't take

place every night; we had simply struck an off-night, and he was going back on his own. He did too, half a dozen times between then and the 30th, even going so far as to have (rather unethically) a key cut from the one Curlew had lent him. Patsy would never go with him, though he tried hard to persuade her.

But in all those visits he never saw or heard anything. And the effect on him was to make him as great a skeptic as Patsy.

"I've a good mind to make an offer for the Rectory myself," he said. "It's a fine house and I've got quite attached to it."

"You're not serious," I said.

"I'm perfectly serious. I'll go to the auction with a view to buying it if I can get Patsy to agree."

But Patsy preferred her own house and, very reluctantly, Gordon had to give up the idea. The Rectory was sold for £62,000 to an American woman, a friend of Judy Lawrence. About a month after the sale the builders moved in. Eleanor used to get progress reports from Patsy, how they had re-wired and treated the whole place for woodworm and painted and re-laid floors. The central-heating engineers came too, much to Patsy's satisfaction.

We met Carol Marcus, the Rectory's new owner, when we were asked round to the Hall for drinks one Sunday morning. She was staying there with the Lawrences until such time as the improvements and decorations to the Rectory were complete. We were introduced by Judy to a very pretty, well-dressed woman in young middle age. I asked her when she expected to move in. April, she hoped, as soon as the builders had finished the two extra bathrooms. She had heard rumors that the Rectory was supposed to be haunted and these had amused her very much. A haunted house in the English countryside! It was too good to be true.

"It's all nonsense, you know," said Gordon, who had joined us. "It's all purely imaginary." And he went on to tell her of his own experiences in the house during October—or his non-experiences, I should say.

"Well, for goodness' sake, I didn't *believe* it!" she said, and she laughed and went on to say how much she loved the house and wanted to make it a real home for her children to come to. She had three, she said, all in their teens, two boys away at school and a girl a bit older.

That was the only time I ever talked to her and I remember thinking she would be a welcome addition to the neighborhood. A nice woman. Serene is the word that best described her. There was

a man friend of hers there too. I didn't catch his surname but she called him Guy. He was staying at one of the local hotels, to be near her presumably.

"I should think those two would get married, wouldn't you?" said Eleanor on the way home. "Judy told me she's waiting to get her divorce."

Later that day I took Liam for a walk along Shawley Lane and when I came to the Rectory I found the gate open. So I walked up the gravel drive and looked through the drawing-room window at the new woodblock floor and ivory-painted walls and radiators. The place was swiftly being transformed. It was no longer sinister or grim. I walked round the back and peered in at the splendidly fitted kitchens, one a laundry now, and wondered what on earth had made sensible women like Mrs. Buckland and Kate spread such vulgar tales and the Galtons panic. What had come over them? I could only imagine that they felt a need to attract attention to themselves which they perhaps could do in no other way.

I whistled for Liam and strolled down to the gate and looked back at the Rectory. It stared back at me. Is it hindsight that makes me say this or did I really feel it then? I think I did feel it, that the house stared at me with a kind of steady insolence.

Carol Marcus moved in three weeks ago, on a sunny day in the middle of April. Two nights later, just before eleven, there came a sustained ringing at Gordon's front door as if someone were leaning on the bell. Gordon went to the door. Carol Marcus stood outside, absolutely calm but deathly white.

She said to him, "May I use your phone, please? Mine isn't in yet and I have to call the police. I just shot my daughter."

She took a step forward and crumpled in a heap on the threshold.

Gordon picked her up and carried her into the house and Patsy gave her brandy, and then he went across the road to the Rectory. There were lights on all over the house; the front door was open and light was streaming out onto the drive and the little Citroen Diane that was parked there.

He went into the house. The drawing-room door was open and he walked in there and saw a young girl lying on the carpet between the windows. She was dead. There was blood from a bullet wound on the front of her dress, and on a low round table lay the small automatic that Carol Marcus had used.

In the meantime Patsy had been the unwilling listener to a confession. Carol Marcus told her that the girl, who was 19, had unex-

pectedly driven down from London, arriving at the Rectory at nine o'clock. She had had a drink and something to eat and then said she had something to tell her mother, that was why she had come down. While in London she had been seeing a lot of the man called Guy and now they found that they were in love with each other. She knew it would hurt her mother, but she wanted to tell her at once, she wanted to be honest about it.

Carol Marcus told Patsy she felt nothing, no shock, no hatred or resentment, no jealousy. It was as if she were impelled by some external force to do what she did—take the gun she always kept with her from a drawer in the writing desk and kill her daughter.

At this point Gordon came back and they phoned the police. Within a quarter of an hour the police were at the house. They arrested Carol Marcus and took her away and now she is on remand, awaiting trial on a charge of murder.

So what is the explanation of all this? Or does there, in fact, have to be an explanation? Eleanor and I were so shocked by what had happened, and awed too, that for a while we were somehow wary of talking about it even to each other. Then Eleanor said, "It's as if all this time the coming event cast its shadow before it."

I nodded, yet it didn't seem quite that to me. It was more that the Rectory was waiting for the right people to come along, the people who would *fit* its still un-played scenario, the woman of 40, the daughter of 19, the lover. And only to those who approximated these characters could it show shadows and whispers of the drama; the closer the approximation, the clearer the sounds and signs.

The Loys were old and childless, so they saw nothing. Nor did Gordon and I—we were of the wrong sex. But the Bucklands who had a daughter heard and felt things, and so did Kate, though she was too old for the tragic leading role and her adolescent girl too young for victim. The Galtons had been nearly right—had Mrs. Grainger once hoped the young Rector would marry her before he showed his preference for her daughter?—but the women had been a few years too senior for the parts. Even so, they had come closer to participation than those before them.

All this is very fanciful and I haven't mentioned a word of it to Gordon and Patsy. They wouldn't listen if I did. They persist in seeing the events of three weeks ago as no more than a sordid murder, a crime of jealousy committed by someone whose mind was disturbed.

But I haven't been able to keep from asking myself what would

have happened if Gordon had bought the Rectory when he talked of doing so. Patsy will be 40 this year. I don't think I've mentioned that she has a daughter by her first marriage who is away at the university and going on 19 now, a girl that they say is extravagantly fond of Gordon.

He is talking once more of buying, since Carol Marcus, whatever may become of her, will hardly keep the place now. The play is played out, but need that mean there will never be a repeat performance . . . ?



DETECTIVERSE

GRAVE SITUATION

by HERBERT KAUFMAN

The graveyard seemed perfect for murder.
 She screamed—of course nobody heard her.
 When the deed had been done
 He saw no need to run,
 And with all due respects he interred her.

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a **NEW** Rand story by

EDWARD D. HOCH

As you know, Rand is retired, no longer the Double-C man, no longer the head of the Department of Concealed Communications. And as you know, his former superior, Hastings, has persuaded Rand to come out of retirement on special occasions. But this time Hastings is after Rand's wife, Leila. It is her particular expertise—Egyptology—that British Intelligence needs and that brings Leila an important undercover assignment in New York . . .

THE SPY WHO WASN'T NEEDED

by **EDWARD D. HOCH**

Whenever Hastings came to dinner Rand was apprehensive. Ever since his retirement as head of the Department of Concealed Communications he'd found himself being lured, cajoled, and coaxed back into intelligence work by the irresistible appeals of his former superior. Often the appeals began over the dinner table at the little country house of Rand and his wife Leila.

"No business tonight," Rand cautioned as he poured the wine one January evening. "I hope you haven't come all the way out here with another one of your projects."

Hastings smiled. "Not at all. Purely a social call to see how you two are doing. After all, I haven't laid eyes on either of you since that Reading business last September. Have a nice holiday?"

"A quiet one," Rand acknowledged. "When one leaves the Service it's sometimes necessary to cultivate a whole new group of friends."

"The old ones still remember you. Parkinson's doing a fine job running Double-C. He especially asked to be remembered to you."

"Good man, Parkinson."

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Leila served a meal of roast beef done up in her special style, and even Hastings was hard pressed for superlatives. "Delicious, my dear! Your cooking is only exceeded by your beauty."

Leila glanced sideways at Rand. "He wants something," she said with a smile.

Rand wiped his mouth with the napkin and refilled their wine glasses. "Yes, Hastings, isn't it about time you broke down and told us? You can talk all you want about this being only a social call, but Leila knows you better than that."

"And I won't let you pull Jeffery away from me one more time!" she insisted.

Hastings was suddenly serious. "I didn't come for Jeffery, Leila. As far as he's concerned this is a social visit just as I said. It's you we need, my dear woman."

"Me?" Leila simply stared at him. "Whatever for?"

"Because you're brave and beautiful and intelligent. And because you're an expert Egyptologist."

Leila had been teaching a course in archeology at the University of Reading, and Rand was always pleased when her talents in this area were recognized. Still, he didn't want her involved in anything Hastings might have in mind. "She'll write you a paper on it," he said. "Will that do you?"

Hastings merely smiled. He'd had long experience dealing with Rand. "We need her in New York. It's very important."

"New York! Why New York?"

"It's a favor to another department, really. They need a woman Egyptologist who can meet with some shady characters in New York. Of course the word's gotten round about that business a few months ago when Leila was kidnaped as part of a plot to steal the King Tut treasures, so naturally her name came up. We know from past experience that you can take care of yourself, Leila, and you're just the person we need on this mission."

"But—what would I be expected to do?"

"These people in New York are offering certain Egyptian pieces for sale, supposedly taken from a newly discovered tomb along the Nile and smuggled out of the country for sale to museums. It's surprising how many reputable institutions are willing to acquire art objects in this manner."

Leila listened, but when he finished she shook her head. "I'm afraid I can't see why all this should concern me."

Hastings smiled like a kindly uncle. "Before you moved to En-

gland and married Rand you worked at the Cairo Museum, didn't you?"

"I worked there while I was teaching at the University of Cairo." Leila was frowning, intent on the conversation. "That's why those people were so sure I could identify the King Tut objects when they kidnaped me."

"And we need you for the same sort of reason. We believe these people in New York are attempting to sell objects stolen from the Cairo Museum."

"Could that be possible?" Rand asked her.

"Anything's possible, I suppose, but there've been no reports of missing artifacts in the press."

"We believe they're being replaced by copies," Hastings answered. "I understand that might be possible at the Cairo Museum."

Leila agreed readily enough. "The place needs a great deal of renovation. The last time I was there, pigeons were actually getting in through broken skylights. Many objects are displayed in dark, cluttered hallways—often without labels. The lighting is especially bad in some areas, and it's quite possible that reasonably good copies would pass undetected."

"Then you'll help us with this?"

She spread her hands helplessly. "I've never been to New York. And the new University term begins the middle of the month."

"You may be back here by the start of the term, and if you're not we'll clear it with the University. As for never having been to New York, I seem to remember, Leila, that you functioned quite well on your first trip to Moscow last year."

"Exactly what would she have to do?" Rand wanted to know.

"Simply pose as an interested buyer representing a British museum. Inspect the objects and verify to us whether you remember them from the Cairo Museum. The police in New York will do the rest."

"It sounds simple enough," Leila told Rand.

"I'll go along," he decided.

"No," Hastings said. "You're too well known. That would give the game away."

And so, with a minimum of discussion, Hastings recruited Leila for a flight to New York and an undercover assignment. It was not until she was already on her way across the Atlantic that Rand started wondering why British Intelligence was so interested in possible thefts from an Egyptian museum.

But by that time it was too late to stop her.

Leila Rand stepped off the plane at Kennedy Airport and passed through customs with a minimum of delay. By the time she'd reached her Manhattan hotel she was already in love with the city, marveling at the way the afternoon sun reflected off the glass-walled buildings. Her only regret was that Jeffery wasn't along to share it with her. "I'm only as far away as the telephone," he'd said. "You can direct-dial our house on your New York phone."

His words added confidence to her lone journey, though she was already having second thoughts about the speed with which she'd agreed to Hastings' request. The plan, as he'd outlined it, was simple enough. A man named Grazer would phone the hotel room shortly after her arrival and give her the address of the place she was to visit. There she would inspect the articles offered for sale and report back to Grazer if any of them were items from the Cairo Museum.

She'd just phoned down for room service, calculating that it was nearly ten o'clock back home, when there was a knock on her door. "Who is it?" she asked.

"Grazer," a man's voice answered.

She opened the door to admit a stocky, rumpled man wearing a tweed overcoat and carrying a briefcase. "You were supposed to telephone," she admonished.

The man named Grazer merely smiled. "Yes, well, there's been a slight change of plans. You are to see a Mr. Chando tomorrow morning at ten, and give him this envelope." From the briefcase he extracted a large manila envelope, its flap sealed with wide tape. "It's a catalogue of the collection at the Cambridge Museum of Egyptology, together with a letter from the director authorizing you to arrange purchases on their behalf. Here's a copy for you to look through, just so you're familiar with it."

"Is Chando the man who's selling the artifacts?"

"That's right. He's a minor official at the Egyptian consulate here. We believe the art objects were brought over in diplomatic pouches. He has a shop on upper Madison Avenue and that's where you'll meet him. Phone this number after nine for an appointment."

"Very well."

Grazer seemed to realize the abruptness of his visit. As he turned to go he said, "I hope you had a good flight."

"I did, thank you."

"Good luck. I'll phone here tomorrow afternoon for your report."

Then he was gone, buttoning his overcoat as he strode down the hall toward the elevators.

Tired as she was from the long flight, Leila drifted off into a dreamless sleep, thinking of Jeffery back home.

Still suffering from jet-lag, she awakened early and breakfasted in the room. By nine o'clock she was showered, dressed, and ready to go out. But she waited another fifteen minutes before phoning Chando at the number Grazer had given her.

"May I speak to Mr. Chando?" she asked the youngish male voice that answered. His accent was distinctly American and she knew he was not Chando.

"Just a moment," he replied.

The line went dead momentarily and then another voice came on, perhaps from an inner office. "Mr. Chando?"

"Is this Leila Rand?"

"That's right. I'm calling for an appointment to view the Egyptian artifacts you have for sale."

"Whom do you represent, Miss Rand?"

"The Cambridge Museum of Egyptology. I've taught at the University of Cairo."

"I see. Could you come up here this morning?"

"I can be there by ten o'clock. I have a catalogue of our collection and a letter from our director."

"That will be most helpful," Chando said. "I will see you at ten."

Leila picked up the envelope Grazer had given her and went downstairs to get a cab. She arrived at the Madison Avenue address within ten minutes but spent a half hour window shopping in the area until it was ten o'clock. The address was that of a small gallery between 75th and 76th Streets. She studied the single painting in the window before entering. It was a water color of a mosque in Alexandria, and she wondered if it was displayed as a signal of some sort.

Inside, a slim young man in a gray suit came forward. "May I help you?" he asked, and she recognized the voice on the telephone.

"I'm Leila Rand. I've come to see Mr. Chando."

He smiled and extended his hand. "Ron Janus. I manage the gallery for Mr. Chando. His work at the consulate takes a great deal of his time, you understand. Step this way, please."

He led the way into a small outer office and Leila handed him the envelope. "This is for Mr. Chando. One of our catalogues."

"Fine." He put it on his desk. "Chando's on the telephone but he

should be free in just a minute." He relaxed and lit a cigarette. "Are you enjoying your visit to our city?"

"I really can't say. I only arrived late yesterday afternoon. It's a good deal colder than England, though."

"But not as damp. And it's supposed to get warmer tomorrow." He gestured with his cigarette, reminding her of an affected British actor she'd once met at a party. "On the wall there behind you is a painting of Hyde Park. It should remind you of home."

She glanced at the water color, which showed the same style as the one in the window. "My home is really Egypt," she explained. "I only moved to England when I married, though my mother was British. Is this by the same man as the one in the window?"

Ron Janus smiled. "Actually they're both by Chando. See his name in the corner? He's very good really."

"I didn't know he painted."

"You can talk to him about it. He's off the phone now."

Janus picked up her envelope and led the way into the inner office. Mr. Chando was a short man with dark wrinkled skin, older than she'd expected. He rose and held out his hand. "What a pleasure this is, Miss Rand. Or is it Mrs.?"

"I'm married," she said simply.

"A lucky man." Janus handed him the envelope and left them alone. "What's this—the catalogue you promised?"

She nodded. "And a letter of introduction from our director."

"You're a charming young lady to be so knowledgeable about Egyptian antiquities." She watched his fingers undo the clasp and lift the flap of the envelope.

"Egypt is my home," she explained. "I was raised on—"

The words froze in her mouth. She saw him pull the layers of cardboard from the envelope, saw the quick snap of something like a mousetrap, and then Mr. Chando seemed to vanish in a blast of light and sound that sent her spinning backward out of her chair.

"No broken bones," the emergency room doctor told her less than an hour later as he finished his examination. "You're a very lucky young lady. We'll get those cuts tended to. You'll be a bit bruised and sore for a few days, but nothing serious."

"Thank you, Doctor," she said, trying to move her right leg to a less painful position on the examining table.

"There's a detective waiting outside to see you."

"That doesn't surprise me. I suppose I'd better see him."

The detective was a friendly middle-aged man named Feeley. "Detective Sergeant George Feeley, ma'am. I'm investigating the bombing."

"Is Chando dead?"

"I'm afraid so. The bomb wasn't awfully powerful, but at that range it was deadly. A sheet of plastic explosive, detonated by a mousetrap arrangement when the envelope was opened. A letter bomb, to use the simple terrorist term for it."

"I thought it was a museum catalogue," she said slowly.

The detective smiled disarmingly. "Obviously you wouldn't have remained in the room had you known the envelope contained a bomb. Even though you were seated some ten feet away you could have been killed or seriously injured."

"I still can't believe it," Leila said. "I slept with that envelope next to my bed last night."

"Who gave it to you?"

She was on dangerous ground here, she knew, and she answered carefully. "A man named Grazer. He's some sort of New York representative for the museum that employs me."

"Where can we find him?"

"I don't know."

"Can you give me a description?"

"Stocky, around forty. Dark hair, glasses. Nothing special about him except that he had a rumpled look."

"Any idea why he'd want to kill Chando?"

"None at all."

"What was the nature of your business with Mr. Chando?"

"I—it concerned the purchase of Egyptian antiquities for a collection in England."

Feeley was still smiling when he asked his next question. "I don't know too much about these things, but isn't the exporting of antiquities against the law in Egypt?"

"Not these, certainly. You can't suspect that an employee of the Egyptian consulate was engaged in anything illegal!"

The smile disappeared. "Lady, the man got himself blown apart. That much is illegal to start with. And I see consulate and U.N. employees engaged in something illegal every day of the week. Most of them park illegally, just as an example. If you're keeping anything from me you'd better think twice about it. You survived that bomb, but you could still be in big trouble unless you can produce this mysterious Grazer."

"Are you saying I'm under arrest?" Leila asked.

"I'm saying you could be held as a material witness."

"Am I allowed one phone call?"

"To your lawyer? Sure."

"Not to my lawyer, to my husband. He's in England."

It was a dreary January afternoon in London, and the weather fitted Rand's mood perfectly. He strode into Hastings' office with only a passing word to the secretaries and others who'd once been his co-workers.

"Well, Rand," Hastings said, rising to greet him. "You sounded quite disturbed on the telephone."

"I have reason to be disturbed. Leila may be in a New York jail at this very moment."

"No, no—it's nothing like that. I'm afraid her telephone call upset you needlessly. I've checked with our people there."

"Who? This man Grazer who gave her the letter bomb? Just what in hell did you get her into?"

Hastings held up his hands, almost as if he expected Rand to strike out at him. "My God, Rand, you must know me better than that! Do you think I'd send Leila into an assassination plot?"

"All I know is what happened. And the more I think about it the more unlikely your first story sounds. British Intelligence doesn't do favors for other departments—not unless it's in your field somehow. What was the real reason you sent Leila to New York?"

"It was pretty much as I stated," Hastings answered defensively.

"Pretty much, but not exactly."

The older man sighed. "You know how it is in the Department, Rand. You were in it long enough yourself. An agent is only told as much as he or she needs to complete the mission."

"Need to know. My wife didn't need to know she was carrying a letter bomb that could have killed or mangled her!"

"I swear to you, Rand, I didn't know about the bomb!"

"Just what did you know?"

"Everything I tell you is highly classified. You're no longer a member of the Department, and you have no—"

"Just tell me!" Rand commanded.

"Well, it was a joint operation with the Americans. You must know that the seemingly endless Middle East peace talks have been the subject of great concern and not a little sabotage by various intelligence agencies. There are some in the Egyptian government

itself who still oppose peace with Israel, and who have taken steps to prevent it. Chando was one of them."

"He was in the pay of the Russians?"

"More likely one of the more militant Arab states."

"So you decided to kill him."

"No, no! You don't understand, Rand. We really have changed our ways since the old days, and so have our American friends."

"I'll bet!"

Hastings smirked. "You're sounding like one of them now. We did want to remove Chando from the scene, but not by killing him. It came to our attention that he might be involved in these museum thefts, exactly as I told Leila. We needed her to pose as a buyer and verify that the objects had indeed come from the Cairo Museum. Then we planned to get rid of him—either by having him arrested in America or by informing the Egyptian authorities and having him shipped back there for trial. Either way he'd have been removed from the scene. So everything I told Leila and you was true. I was only secretive about the true motive for our interest in Chando. It was indeed an intelligence operation from beginning to end."

"Who is this man Grazer, the one who brought Leila the letter bomb?"

"Well," Hastings admitted, "there's a problem. Grazer isn't exactly a person."

"Isn't a person! Do you think Leila imagined him? You told her yourself that he'd contact her."

"Of course Leila didn't imagine him! What I mean to say is that Grazer is a code name for agents operating in friendly countries. The man who came to see your wife using the name Grazer could be any one of six different agents in the New York area."

"Surely she could identify his picture!"

"That's one of the problems. It would be a violation of security to produce pictures of all six men. Leila, and presumably the police, would then know the identities of our entire New York bureau."

"What difference does it make? You said yourself that America is a friendly country. You're certainly not spying on them!"

"We're protecting British interests," Hastings replied, a bit testily.

"And I'm protecting Leila's interests. I want a seat on the next Concorde to New York."

"That's out of the question, Rand! You're not needed there."

"My wife needs me."

"Calm down a bit, will you? We're trying to get through to our

New York people and the Americans right now, to find out who authorized the killing. At least wait until we have more information about this whole business."

"I'll wait, but I'll wait right here in your office. We can have dinner sent in."

Hastings glanced unhappily at the clock. "It's not even one o'clock yet in the States. This killing of Chando happened less than three hours ago. We might have a long wait for any news."

"We'll wait all night if we have to," Rand answered grimly.

Leila had telephoned Rand from the hospital shortly after eleven o'clock. Now, at one thirty, she was hurrying back to her hotel in the company of a grim-faced detective named Burke. Sergeant Feeley had agreed to her request that she be allowed to replace her torn and blood-spattered dress before questioning was resumed at police headquarters. Still, the presence of Burke at her side was a constant reminder that she was far from free. Sergeant Feeley obviously had no intention of turning her loose until he had the full story, or until the man named Grazer was safely behind bars.

"I'll wait here," Detective Burke told her when they reached the door of her room. "Make it fast."

Inside, Leila got the first good look at herself in the mirror. Bandages covered the cut on her forehead and the one on her neck, and a larger bandage had been applied to her forearm. The green wool dress she liked so much was torn in one place and spotted with blood. Seeing the blood, she was reminded again of that scene in the office—Chando unfastening the clasp of the envelope, lifting the flap, and pulling out the cardboard. Then the snap of the mousetrap detonator and the flash of the explosion. She thought the memory of it would stay with her the rest of her life.

She was starting to pull the green dress over her head when the man named Grazer stepped out of the hotel bathroom, holding a silenced pistol pointed at her chest.

"All right," Hastings said when he'd finished the transatlantic call on the scrambler phone. "At least now we have a little more information. The killing of Chando was not authorized, either by our people or the Americans. Grazer acted on his own."

"How is that possible?" Rand wanted to know.

"You were in this business long enough to know the troubles we occasionally have with rogue agents, Rand. There's no way of con-

trolling completely every man on our payroll, especially in the case of overseas assignments."

"All right. What about Grazer?"

"We've narrowed it down to two agents. One was assigned to meet Leila, but he was taken ill and they seem to think the second man might have substituted for him."

"Convenient."

"Seems so, doesn't it? In any event, both Grazers have dropped out of sight since this morning. If he knows we're after him our man may have gone into hiding."

"Leila can identify him. She may be in danger."

"I'm assured the police won't let her out of their sight. They have too many questions to ask her, and they'll have a great many more when word reaches them about the international interest in Chando."

"I still think I should be there with her."

"It'll all be over before you could reach New York, even by Concorde. It's only a matter of hours before our people locate the right Grazer."

"Or the wrong Grazer."

"Yes." It was dark outside by then, and Hastings turned in his chair to look out over the river. Rand wondered if he could see anything out there besides the pale reflections of their own troubled faces in the glass windowpanes.

Leila Rand stood very still, staring at the gun with its ugly black silencer. "You said you'd call," she remarked, trying to keep her voice casual.

"I was searching your room," Grazer said. "You came back unexpectedly."

"Searching? For what?"

"Don't play dumb with me!"

"Look here, there's a detective right outside that door. If I scream he'd be in here in a second."

"And you'd be dead."

"I'll take that chance."

Grazer raised the pistol a fraction of an inch. "I've no time for games. Who's paying you?"

"I thought we were on the same side until a few hours ago."

"What happened at the gallery—"

He was interrupted by a knocking on the door. Detective Burke

was growing impatient. Either that, or he'd heard the sound of their voices. "Open it!" Grazer commanded, stepping quickly behind the door.

Leila did as she was told. She saw Burke's face as the door opened, saw Grazer's silenced pistol raised, and then she acted. She brought the door back hard, catching Grazer in the abdomen with the knob. He gasped and the pistol coughed close to her head, sending its bullet across the room. Then Burke had his service revolver out. They struggled at close quarters for a few moments until the detective got an arm free and hit Grazer a glancing blow with the gun butt. Burke backed off, covering Grazer as he slumped to the floor.

"No tricks now," he warned Leila. "I thought I heard voices."

"Tricks! I was helping you! This is the man who gave me the letter bomb!"

Burke stepped to the telephone and dialed the operator. "Police officer requests assistance in room 532," he said brusquely.

"Can I finish changing my dress now?" she asked.

Grazer was barely stirring on the floor. Burke glanced into the bathroom, perhaps to be certain no one else lurked there. "Go ahead, but be quick about it."

It was while she was removing the dress that she thought again of the way Chando died, and suddenly realized that she'd made a terrible mistake.

"I have to talk to Sergeant Feeley right away," she told Burke as she came out of the bathroom.

"And that's right where I'm taking you, as soon as somebody arrives for our friend on the floor here."

But it was another hour before Leila found herself once more with George Feeley. He smiled again as he greeted her, and ushered her into his tiny cubicle in the squad room. "Burke said you were anxious to talk with me."

"I am. They've arrested Grazer."

"The man in your hotel room." Feeley nodded. "That was good work on your part, Mrs. Rand."

"But don't you see? It's all a mistake! Grazer is innocent!"

Feeley's smile turned slowly into a frown. "He's the man who gave you the letter bomb, isn't he? And he did threaten you with a gun in your hotel room, didn't he?"

"He was in my room searching for more explosives and detonators. Don't you see—he thought *I* made up the letter bomb and killed

Chando!" She was exasperated with herself, searching for the right words. "He thought I was trying to frame him for the murder."

"How do you know it wasn't Grazer?" Feeley asked.

"The envelope he left with me had a wide piece of tape across its flap. But just before the bomb went off I saw Chando open the envelope. He undid the clasp and lifted the flap. He couldn't have done that if there was tape over it."

"Which means—?"

"That it was a different envelope! A substitution was made!"

"By whom?"

"The only person who could have made it is Ron Janus, the gallery manager. The envelope was on his desk, and he called my attention to a painting on the wall behind me. When I turned my head he switched envelopes. I'd told Chando on the phone that I was bringing a catalogue. Janus must have been listening in, and decided it was the perfect opportunity to frame someone else for Chando's murder. He could easily guess the catalogue would be in a standard-sized clasp envelope, and the tape was a minor detail that didn't seem to matter. Even if I noticed in the last instant that it was a different envelope, he probably figured the explosion would kill me too."

"What if your envelope was pink, or green? What if you handed over the catalogue without an envelope?"

"Then he'd simply leave the letter bomb in his desk and wait for another and better opportunity."

"You know so much, what would be his motive?"

"Chando was importing stolen art objects in diplomatic pouches from Egypt. I imagine Janus decided he wanted the deal all for himself. It was a case of thieves falling out."

Sergeant Feeley waited no longer. He walked to the door of his cubicle and called out, "Burke, get a car around front. We're going back to that gallery and talk with Ron Janus again."

It was close to midnight when the telephone rang on Hastings' desk. Rand knew it was an overseas call when the scrambler was switched on. Hastings listened with intense interest, giving only brief monosyllabic replies. Finally he hung up and looked at Rand.

"She's all right. And neither of our Grazer agents was involved after all."

Rand's mouth was dry. "What happened?"

"It seems that one of Chando's partners in crime switched envelopes and killed him. When the police returned to the art gallery

to question him they found him trying to move some of the stolen goods out of the building's basement."

"And Leila?"

"I told you she was all right. In fact, she's the one who solved it. She's flying home tomorrow."

Rand let out his breath. "I suppose I wasn't needed after all."

"Leila's the one who was needed. Damn it, Rand, we might be able to find a place for her in—"

"No!" Rand said, and that was the end of the conversation.



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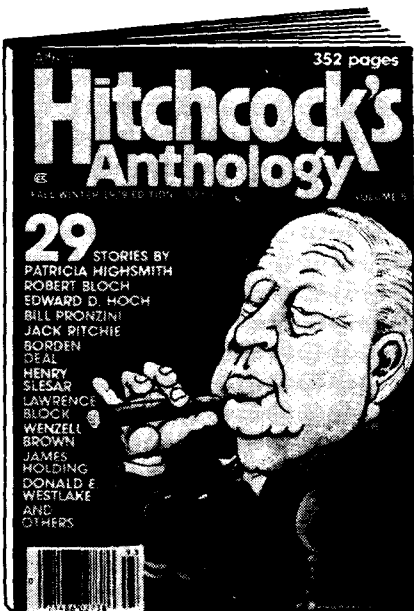
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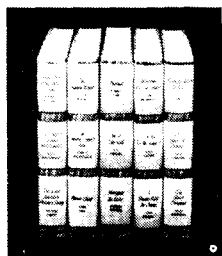
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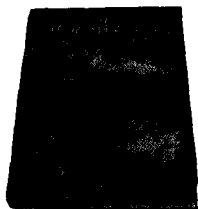
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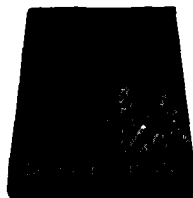
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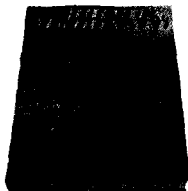
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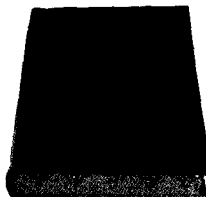
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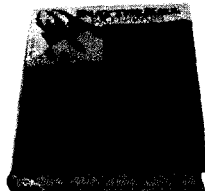
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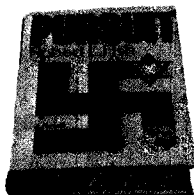
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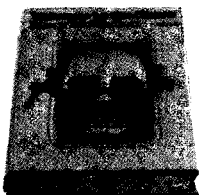
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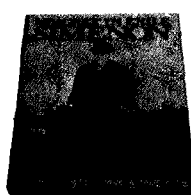
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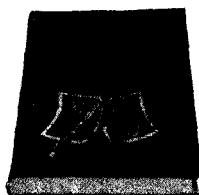
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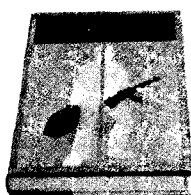
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